

A North Sea Memoir

living in the afterbirth of the Second World War

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Preamble

This story of the shaping of an ego was predicated by a young woman's escape across the North Sea from war honoured England to socially designed Sweden. Circa 1948 the British Council was active in spreading the Anglo lingua franca, and the young woman, my mother, took the word to the North of Sweden where she met my father, a Swedish soldier who had never fought. There the two wed and bred me. They came from countries with different war experiences, but shared their part in the colossus of a generation across Europe that was on the move, a wave roaring up the shore of history. The posting to Sweden was chance, but it was a chance event that presaged my particular birth, - a curious amalgam of genes and volatility.







My birth

“The clinician wore a white mask to intimidate us... a medical mask to stop him getting infected...”

“...but you didn't have a disease...”

“of course not, he was just a classic style oafish doctor bullying his way out of being cornered with a complaint.”

That was how my mother introduced me to the history of my birth, - the subject of a case lodged with the medical authorities over the way she was treated, and the doctor who heard the case was protected with a gauze mask stretched across his mouth and nose.

My mother told me when I was pregnant with twins, never having said anything about it in thirty years. There were some hints at an odd birth, and I had been born, emerged into the world, covered in

black down which had some preternatural connotations. But now cornered, she spilt the beans.

“...take every painkiller you can get your hands on”, she advised.

The physical reality of birth was something she was worried about - whether I'd handle the mess and the extremity – well she simply couldn't imagine me there – lily livered, cocooned life that I'd led.

My birth in the northern wastes of Sweden had been seared into her being like the worst of birth marks. A ghastly freak inflicted by an example of blue eyed Nordic sadism in the person of the nurse in charge, who withheld pain relief through a birth that lasted thirty six agonising hours and left a young mother in a foreign hospital determined never to venture pregnancy – a sister or a brother for me – again. The miracle was that it hadn't polluted the relationship between my mother and I, though writing this now I wonder whether there was an edge of grievance in her love and doting.

I can't honestly say there was, only latterly the contrast between my youth and her age grated on her – and that grating was there

around the time when I gave birth to the twins. So she chose to holiday in an exotic spot in Communist Russia while I laboured.

It was the sort of thing she would normally have condemned.

“The thing I never forgave your father for was that he partied while I was in hospital giving birth to you; the Sodertstrums weren’t to be missed.” Not that men held wives hands in those days, but she had a point.

Our relationship hadn’t been polluted despite her annoyance with half of the team that went into my making, aggravated no doubt by her retrospective guilt over the adultery and divorce to follow. It hadn’t been affected by the wretchedness and trauma of the business of the birth. Nor had it been punctured by the embarrassment with her relatives in Romford with their East End 1950s priggery, when she faced informing them of my early arrival by a full month. There were only eight months from her marriage to my birth. It was inconceivable with my father’s propriety that I could have been conceived pre-nuptial – or was it? Half blood siblings had chuckled at his funeral when I told them and they engaged in

the sort of disrespectful conjecture and hilarity that comes with the embarrassment of death.

Because I was prematurely outed into the world, there were bits of black fur on my body – a sinister spectacle, and my mother was forced to lie about my age, so that for eighteen years we celebrated my birth in December rather than November – a month from the truth. Yet despite it all, she honestly loved me. The fur tufts on my ears moulted, leaving me small with a pixie cap of becoming black hair. It was my luck to look pretty, - at least through those early years.

Baby photos and Mummy

What do I still have of that time in the early 1950s? – pictures – photos, to which shades of memory adhere, from which they eddy reflecting the countless times and contexts when I've looked at them on my grandmother's mantelpiece, in my photo album compiled by me of me in the narcissistic years of emerging self, and compiled for me by others for my fiftieth birthday – the closing down half century celebrations.

There's a picture of me lying horizontal, minute in a white muslin gown – the garb of angels, doe dark eyes and black hair – a month old. Another one of the same pose, but with my mother behind as backdrop – attractive, her birth agony vanquished, at least on camera, and you can see the beauty of contrasts in the picture – her black stuff dress, fitted, with a 50s V line to the bosom and an emerging neck of white, like a swan. Full lipped, I would guess that she wore red lipstick, though the photo was in black and white, and fifties hair – sloping to the nape of the neck, dark, framing a broad but elegant face. Beautiful. The early years were a love affair with my mother. She was the apple of my eye with her loveliness and vitality.

Then there was the picture as the toddler me – round cheeks, black hair - fringed, cut Chinese style – with a flowery dress, puffed sleeves, sitting bolt upright with a ball in my lap for effect. A Chinese baby, my father called me. That is undoubtedly hearsay, I can't remember it – but what I do remember is a little while after the cherub roundness had vanished to make me look even more Chinese – say three or four years old, sitting in my father's lap to some nursery rhythm the line of which I loved

“And the best Daddy, of course,
Was a soldier Daddy on a horse.”

Daddy

He was the only person to have called me darling. Our Freudian unity makes a lovely tableau in my memory – and in my memory of my memory – thinking about it at different ages 16, 20, 30 and so on. Thinking of him in the earlier absences from him, the other side of the North Sea – spruce, manicured, the shine of polish, fresh white shirts and the smell of Old Spice round his neck with my hands clasped behind it. My starched dress was a match, and we made a fine couple.

Perhaps I enjoyed him most in khaki, the leather strap diagonal across his chest, the bronze metal on lapel and shoulder. Am I in a blue birds, soft music and the comfort of virtue and war reverie? Only he hadn't fought in a war. At the end of his life – fifty years in the Swedish army - he hadn't fired a shot.

But he was an adapted, self-made English gentleman type, even with his sympathies with the German officer class – and after all

the latter were not too dissimilar to some in the upper crust of England, the adopted country of his dreams.

Sweden

We lived in a small military town in the north of Sweden – soldiers and lumberjacks, lakes, trees, snow and military swank. Only for a few years smack at the beginning of my life. Trying not to charge it with retrospective and contextual savvy, I would say they were vivid, happy, exciting snapshots tinged with a shade of menace.

Swedish army Christmas

Christmas at the officers' mess, what could have been a more glorious event for a child – even for an adult? All I can remember of the mess is that it was grand and old with great vaulted windows and hidden in trees. The party of children flocked to the windows straining to look out into the big black – snow and trees eerily lit by torches.

“It's coming, it's coming!” - the shout went up.

Looking for the sleigh with Father Christmas – Tomten (A young lieutenant had dressed up into the part, I later learned). Straining, in extremity and bliss – and then the sleigh came round the corner.

The joy of the gift I received in all the glitter of the mess from Tomten; glittering girls dressed to the nines in the flounce and full skirts of fifties dresses and the boys in dicky bow ties (a Swedish custom - I have a picture of my half brother looking adorable in one at the age of four or five). And then the presentation by Tomten himself – dressed in full fig as he was - in front of all those children and parents. It's all very dim now as a memory, but the joy of the dolls' furniture I received – Swedish white wood with linen centre pieces in red – classy, stylish, expensive. All for the dolls' house my father had made for my birthday a couple of weeks before, despite his inability to carpenter – practically dead in the water. Yet that year when I turned three or four, there was this, a house with three floors in plywood grey and the front opened on its hinges like a huge door. Flimsy it was, but treasured, and in the pantheon of family mythology has engendered a lifetime of gratitude for something utterly magical, what I wanted and improbable.

The last time I thought of this was in vino on a night train journey back from some far-flung place and seminar on divorce. Perhaps that's what prompted it. My face profiled in the window of the train reflecting from the black of the world outside - was my father! The contours the same – a shiver of recognition – I was undoubtedly engaged in tipsy introspection.

Games at the Christmas party

Bjornen sover, bjornen sover

I sitt lugna bo. Han

ar inte farlig,

bara ma ar varlig,

men man kan dock,

men man kan dock honom

aldrig tro.

The bear is sleeping, the bear is sleeping

in his tranquil den. He

is not dangerous

if only you go softly, but
the truth is you can never trust him,
you can never be sure.

I was curled up – the bear – in the centre of the crowd of children,
singing with the scent of anticipated hysteria, - as on cue the beast
wakes and runs at the fleeing hordes with their high pitched
infantile squeaks until a victim is caught, mauled and becomes
born again bear.

Presents over, we were in full swing of party – singing, dancing,
fleeing, screaming – my mother fully a part in a way that only she
could be. It is what explains the wailing of her friends at her
memorial service – joy, anger, bossy, bumptious – a conduit to
living for them – for me, for all of us. Bending, she helped me to
take part in the rituals of release, full of pleasure and gusto, and a
laugh like an unstoppable spring of water from some deep well
within her.

She was glamorous that night – like her picture. A dress from fifties
vogue, - bell skirt, plunging neckline, material sloping her

shoulders, an exotic bird. Although my step-brother assured me she was never beautiful.

How much of this can I genuinely remember? Perhaps her dress was from a cine film of a family Christmas in Malmo a few years later. But most of it stands. The articulation of it doesn't convey the muzziness of it, that's all. Speech, other than the feeling conveyed, seems to take little long-term hold, but the rhythm of a chant – “a soldier Daddy on a horse”, does. And pictorial image – myself as “bear” “bjorn”, curled up in the centre of that crowd.

Brother sister

My half brother Mats was ten years my senior and born of my father's previous marriage. He had a wonderful shock of blond hair, and was good looking all his life, growing up to look like the film star Harrison Ford, with all the attendant complications that that level of dash affords. He must have got them from his mother's side because, as my mother said, my father was not handsome.

There are two incidents that I remember with Mats in those early years. The first – I must have been very young – perhaps it even predated Christmas at the mess, probably the same year because Mats couldn't have been more than twelve making me three or four. A first Swedish memory along with being sung to on my father's knee. We made the perfect sibling couple, he blond and me dark, at a swank officers' do thrown by my mother, - swank within the not too serious limitations of a Swedish flat, - half a large house with a large garden. The smell of wood, the parquet floor, rugs, white painted wooden furniture in traditional style, glass and silver, a palace to a child, but shrunk to reasonable proportions in my adult mind - to what could have been afforded on officer's pay.

The night of the party it was the Christmas mess in miniature. Peopled with the grand, the elegant, the tall young officers and their flock of wives. All laced with Swedish etiquette, which had a quaint formality from another era; boys bowed and girls curtsied on greeting ; social intercourse required a gloveless handshake ; you should only drink when 'skaling' – inviting someone to raise a glass and exchange an intimate glance, and those you were entitled to invite to 'skal' were defined by a

deferential map of social rank. Mats with aplomb served drinks and canopies. I was presented as a doll and curtseyed my way to bed.

When was the second episode? Somehow I imagine it was later because he must have been taller to be able to lift me up and put me in a high up cupboard. We were a little older, and somehow or other my mother and I were back from an interlude in England. I was half scared of my half brother, absent from each other too much for familiarity to grow. This was a chance to cement our friendship with conspiratorial naughtiness, though even so I had a feeling of unease at his hiding me away in a tiny cubby hole so high up off the ground, pushing me back into the womb. Our parents returned to the house, searched, where was she? – gone, horror! – until he opened the door and delivered their child. An episode of excitement, love and wickedness.

Snow and sultry days

These were days of snow, small old wooden skis for a child, a hat from Lapland – voluminous, multi-coloured felts – a picture of me fully clad like a lap doll. There were friends in the snow. “Clem kom

ut och leka” “Clem come out and play”– a refrain I remember, - so out in the snow to play.

I must have been able to speak Swedish a little, or even quite a bit then, - to be able to play. It must have been one of the few phrases that became ingrained when we stayed for a while in the tug of war between England and Sweden – my mother and I, before setting off on our travels.

There were other long stays – the first of course after I was born, then when my mother brought over an au pair from one of her schools – was it a year we stayed at that time? I could perhaps trace it back over the limited number of years of my early pre-school life.

Skiing, sledging. And then there were the sultry days, didn't they make up for three quarters of the year in semi darkness? - My mother didn't think so. Two tableaux – images – one of them a blisteringly hot afternoon in the garden – the person taking the picture had forgotten to say smile. It was a beautiful garden, a temple- like outdoor fireplace, a sundial – more of a globe with an arrow through it – an altar at which I would worship.

Mats and I looked the perfect contrasting couple as we had at the night of the officers' party – sleek black and blond – except in this picture it was hot – the sun's shine glanced off our hair, - he is in white shirt and shorts – me in white dress, puffed sleeves and embroidered, puckered front. My eyes were screwed up in the sun, but his were screwed on the ground with a sullen look. It was the same face that I could see in my mother reclining in the white Swedish garden furniture that same hot day – sultry is how she looked in a floral sundress, straw hat – a sulky star, her eyes cast down into a book, - like a member of the dissatisfied upper class literate. A face slack with concentration - why do faces look so black without animation? I honestly don't think it is peculiar to my mother, though it was a deep concentration and glower.

And it was there again in the only other photo that I have of her summering in Sweden, this time eating – the picnic and the company were not to her taste.

We had gone to a place where there were rocks, islands, water in parts, trees and grass down to the sea, the rocks gently sculpted as the whole land mass eased its way to the water, archetypal Swedish archipelago. I have a hint of memory of it beyond the

photograph. I can remember the man who shared our picnic – perhaps because of a child’s awe at strangers. I don’t know who he was and he never featured again in our story – but looking at the picture now of him stretched out on the beach, he was good looking, seal like with dark hair and a tanned skin – and somehow I registered that then. Presumably a fellow officer, for some reason on his own and taken into the shelter of a small family. Then there was my father and I venturing out into the northern water, a water that was almost flat in the sun, - shrieking, laughing with the excitement of the cold. The conviviality of the situation stayed with me. I was naked, as children in Sweden were allowed to be, not that there was anyone there but our party, - we had the whole paradisaal setting to ourselves. He was in boxer shorts – knobbly knees, not becoming, but a distinguished face. Someone took our photograph. I suppose it must have been my mother. We are both half turned from our adventure looking back towards the shore, smiling for the camera – my own smile a frantic histrionic grimace.

And there was the picnic, with a snap of us all – it must have been one of those cameras that you could set up to operate on its own. We were all caught off guard. My mother was not smiling. Her body weight resting uncomfortably on one arm, she was eating,

distracted, unengaged – with a look that led you to believe her dissatisfied with the day, - and I have a retrospective suspicion, that she even had half an eye on the camera. Not so off her guard.

The curse of language

I said that generally language and words did not stay with me from those early years – pictorial images were all, apart from songs and rhymes. But there was an exception, as I grappled with the toing and froing of my understanding of English and Swedish. And it was laced with adventure and fear, not unlike the hiding in the cupboard episode – but far worse. It hangs over as memory without the aid of a photo. There are elements of sheer terror.

That day I strayed from home on a quest to find Daddy at work and a sweet shop – out of bounds, challenging the twin boggy's of my both real and fantastical world; there was the road at the top of the hill that you had to cross and bears.

It was out of bounds, beyond range, where one was supposed not to be – and I must have been very small – but sufficiently

competent to somehow make the expedition. Whether there were two sorties fused into one in my memory by dint of their psychological unity, quests and forbidden fruit, I don't know.

Off to find my father in his regiment, way off, high up in what must have been a small part of our small town, conceived by me as both reachable and unreachable. After all he walked it every day –so? I made it beyond the first terror, the one that subsequently brought out my mother's terrified wrath, muffled by love. It turned out to be a demonstrably excessive fear - negotiated there and back – the ROAD. But beyond that there was the danger that made me turn back – in the woods – I remember a small dip, a green dark crater where I cowered and bears became a fixated menace. Of course there was the odd bear in the forests beyond, or at least I think there were, or was that too imagination fodder? Had my father told me of bears to entertain? Threats were not their style, although there was an edge to it. As to my mother, it seemed to me that she took bears less seriously than she should. For her, brought up in England, the road was the danger, but for me it was a toss up between two terrors. Concrete and fantastical both – there were cars, but only a few; there were deadly animals in the forest stretches beyond.

And then there was the third terror ...language. Did they find me in the shop after this adventure? Did I metamorphose there from this or another episode – no before no after – just the poignancy of the thrill – the awful barrier of not being able to converse. I don't know if I'd call it embarrassment – embryonic embarrassment is perhaps all that can be attributed to a child of that age, as I grappled with formulating one language from another.

It must have been when we had just arrived back from one of our English sojourns, my early grasp of Swedish gone. I had it in my head that adding 'en' to the end of English words would get me the good of sweets. A certain linguistic perspicacity apart, it did nothing of the sort – to the rising embarrassment of the shop keeper as I repeated my utterances causing a commotion, flurry of exchange, - and the drama was escalated by the shop door ringing and opening - my mother and father arriving with a grand operatic entrance – loud, wreathed in smiles of relief. Found and rescued!

Sweden then

What is my view of Sweden as it was then in the early years of my childhood – the first half of the 1950s? Laced with hindsight as the interpretation of it must be, - the world of my later childhood puts it in context as do histories, commentaries, post war images of Sweden, my parents' views.

My mother hated and loved Sweden. She hated what she thought of as its stifling formality – the handshakes (never with a glove on, a code I remember being reprimanded for breaking when, in a mid-winter farewell, I shook hands with my brother with a glove on!). There was the sitting of people in seniority ranks at dinner parties, and who was allowed to 'skal' with whom, a ritual involving the naming of your 'skalling' partner, lifting the glass, engaging the eye, drinking together – gaze locked. My mother would tell the tale of a fellow fish out of water – an American wife who tried to hold a cocktail party with mingling being the core of the entertainment, ducking and weaving, slipping in and out of conversations, cut throat in its light touch (the ability to dump bores and the non-influential). The young Swedish officers would have none of it; they stuck with their traditional lengthy introductions and handshakes.

This skittish Anglo- Saxon invention was not going to budge the hallowed security of a culture scarce out of its ritualised peasant nappies.

Of course ritual and formality were heightened in the military, and my father did his best to preserve it being the last officer in the Swedish army to wear a cloak. But high etiquette went beyond the army; it was pervasive across Swedish respectable society – dinners were formal, drinking strictly restricted to ‘skalling’, boys bowed and girls curtsayed to their seniors. My mother both despised and loved it. However much she ridiculed, she was drawn to my father’s courtship ritual, calling on her astride a horse, cloaked – attentive to dress, to the spectacle, to her. She approved the curtsying in children which she encouraged me to continue in England. And in England she continued with the elaborate entertaining arranged to perfection – table setting and a count down to visitors’ arrival like the preparations for a military inspection. She terrified her visitors into submission with it all – or maybe, as she reflected years later, it caused the more classy and assured of them to recognise that she was not one of them.

And the modernity, tastefulness and decency, these are things she wholly loved – the fitted kitchens, the simple lines, the wood, the light. She once said that Swedes had a strong aesthetic gene, the lowliest of homes had a refinement. At the beginning of an era of the emerging middle class welfare state that gene had the potential to blossom and tone a brave new world to what was pleasing on the eye.

She was 1945 Labour too, in some part of her, along with the social aspiration, and Sweden was the epitome of social democracy, it was the epicentre of decent social solidarity in a post war milieu fractured by communism and capitalism. But more importantly for her, it was a split with an inherently conservative England with its layers of regressive establishment.

Not that she was wholly averse to those layers. She hated and loved snobbery, to which both England – and Sweden in its more muted way, were in thrall. She played the game. She played it like a dexterous sword's person – a peculiar respect and engagement with the 'enemy'.

She was feverish with ambivalence towards Sweden and remained so throughout her life, loved, hated - I remember she once described the beauty of the girls that aged quickly; she was convinced they became ashen from too much sun bathing and too many cakes.

I think she almost couldn't allow for their good looks and had to detract from them. Yes, she could acknowledge her delight in Swedish form, but it had to be tempered by a loathing of the language, its sing song sound filled her with revulsion – retrospectively pinpointing the unhappiness she experienced in the place, an unhappiness that was largely to do with the dark, the snow, the loneliness of a foreign land – solitary lakeside walks in millions of firs that bore in on the psyche. No marital relationship could withstand the sunless cold, and certainly not one built on a chimera of dreams and compensations.

For my father the traditional Swedish dreams – the dress, the formality – were a lasting love at first sight. It must have come to him when he was a child. He was the last officer in the Swedish army to wear a cloak, indeed his courtship of my mother was spiced by his daily riding to see her wrapped in said cloak on a

horse. He loved and kept faith with formality, holding to the minutiae of expected dress, gesture, manners, station.

Hand in hand with that, he vehemently denounced all things social democratic. But most of what he said was huff and puff. There was a sneaking ambivalence there, an acceptance and expectation of the social insurance comfort cushion, standards of welfare decency, and even a modicum of modernity of style - certainly in the utensils and props of everyday living.

On the other front, he shared unequivocally, if not publicly, my mother's loathing for the Scandinavian cold and the wastes, the hostile and trying nature with the discomfort it inflicted. An exemplary officer, looked up to by his soldiers – we got letters when he died from those who had worked under him decades back – yet he hated manoeuvres, pitting against the elements, and point blank refused to ever camp when we went on holiday; even picnics were kept to a minimum – they would have been a busman's holiday for one who had had enough of conquering nature (his own included). At bottom he was an armchair soldier who preferred the après ski, horses dressage and the protocols of the mess.

What of any of this can I honestly say were my thoughts as a young child? Up to the age of five my recollections were snippets – the smell of the houses, the wood in them, the pine furniture, the exposed sleek wood floors and the crisp smell of air in Sweden – there was an edge to it, less sweet than English air. The fine lines, the glass, the use of light, the white garden furniture out of an Ingmar Bergman film. The outdoor fireplace, the sundial – indoors none of the dinginess, softness of carpets – a few rugs that were bashed clean on clotheslines outside; a glass and bamboo trolley, treasured artefact for years into my adult life; white and blue crockery. Dressing up properly, full and over-coated for winter – dressing down for summer, to my nakedness on the beach.

Kitchens that even had glass containers for salt and flour built, slotted under the cupboards – fitted stoves, fitted wardrobes – fitted, fitted.

It fitted me – certainly it did from age eight to fourteen which was when I began to be reflective, and I realise that much of the film of understanding that I have lain across my earliest memories comes from then – from about eight – returning to Sweden without a

mother after my parents divorced. And curiously none of it changed very much from Sweden in those formative worthy post war years. Of course there were glosses here and there – the sink taps kept changing - but it never had a blip of flashiness like Britain in the Thatcher years.

For me all of this was typified by the bicycle, - which did not become a horizontal, bottom-slicer for the young, but remained the same shape – big, solid, functional , a caring social democratic bicycle which had given some good times and has hung on in there.

I think there is something of my love of modernity that I can trace back to those early Swedish years, and even more so, curiously I suppose, my love of formality.

England

- arriving

“Sixty Two Fontayne Avenue”, my mother would say imperiously to the taxi drivers, as though for all the world we were going to be rolling up to a residence of substance; she had the accent and tones of the film stars of her time – hints of Celia Johnson and the Queen. For me these were reassuring tones, getting into the black cab, the familiar request, reassurance that this was the last port of call after a long trek across Sweden, across the North Sea, from Tilbury to London – Liverpool Street – and from London out. (I felt the same in reverse when I travelled to see my father and he welcomed me in open arms from the boat or the boat train – wined and dined on the ferry across the Oresund from Copenhagen to Malmo, and barked his order to the taxi – “Regements Gatan...”, home of my aunt - my Swedish mother as she was.

But that was Sweden and later; this was England and one of my youngest memories. My mother queenly, - the grandeur of the cab

- and we were off to see another queen in her roomy, post-war, semi-detached cottage of a council house in the heart of Romford, - somewhere that today is irretrievably Essex, but then was only just beginning its post-war bulge and sprawl from the market town it once was.

Nanny's home

But council house it nevertheless was – not that that had any connotations for me then. It was cosy, and when she stood six feet tall in the doorway – arms outstretched to a granddaughter – wrapped, a skein of reassurance engulfed me; the net curtains on the window, the open fireplace, the brasses everywhere – beside the grate, in the alcove, on the sideboard in the dining room – brasses that she religiously polished every week, and cursed, the old toad work that they inflicted on her. And hanging from the dado rail on the walls of the sitting room samplers worked by the Buckworth women from the 1800s to the 1930s – with one done by a stranger, a Swedish sampler, my mother's offering; she always complained that her presents were relegated to the back bedroom,

yet it hung proudly with the Buckworths in the front room – the parlour.

The furniture was dark, cottage like – the lace drapes on the sofa - Nanny's tall chair by the hearth, suited to the scale and status of her person. There was a smell of mustiness – no central heating and pervasive cold except for the precinct of the open coal fire, offset by an excuse for heat in the other rooms from an electric bar or two. The bathroom a fridge; hot water steamed as it hit the bracing air and you couldn't use too much. Damp bedrooms. Post-war discomfort, offset by the bounce of my age and the love of grandmotherly comforts; the gas stove in the kitchen - fried breakfast, roast dinner – emitted some heat. A colossus of a dresser housed bits and pieces to be explored by a child astonished by the labyrinthine design. All in one, it was brilliant by any standard – glass doors at the top, the half table that came out so that you could butter bread on it – the cupboards beneath. There was the jar in the dining room with three-penny pieces in it for grandchildren. The enormous jug always filled with flowers. The chocolate paint on the banisters, the cubbyhole under the stairs. My grandmother's dressing table with a jumble of – but not a jumble because each had its allotted place – of glass bottles and

china dishes, grips, hair nets, silver brushes – and lavender ; lavender was the smell that clung to her place and self, that and the smell of smoke. Smoke didn't trouble me then - it was even a comfort, my father's cigars and pipes – my grandmother standing at the sink washing up and fag hanging out of her mouth has disgusted people in the telling, but then I sort of enjoyed the long gravity defying ash that grew and grew with the burning of the cigarette – that she could not flick off because her hands were immersed in water, until finally it would fall as often as not into the bowl of suds. It made me laugh - the woodbines and coughing were part and parcel of living and as comical as my Uncle Jack's raw egg milk downed regularly each morning to my disbelief and wonderment.

“All the nice girls love a sailor, all the nice girls love a tar...”, my grandmother would sing in her deep cigarette sodden voice in honour of her second husband Jack whom she had run off with during the war, a sailor with queer habits like drinking raw egg – and years later I found out why when he was dying of a liver complaint, over-keen on a tippie like all merchant seamen.

Photographs

Like every grandmother's house it boasted framed photographs – my Uncle Roland young, raw, handsome in uniform, who was shot down in the war on his first flight over France. And the bridesmaids photograph of four girls, my mother and siblings in long rapturous flowing lace, long ringleted hair – ditto bouquets that were more like garlands trailing from their hands to the floor. They were ravishing, drawing me into their fantastic world. Another photograph was of the four girls in the back garden in 1949, utility clothes cut to the knee, shoulders padded, shortened hair, flat shoes – the pathetic fallacy of a raw winter's day magnified by a black and white photograph. Despite the gloom they cut a magnificent composition, all tall, well busted, with perfect posture – lined up against their futures. And then there was “Spring Blossoms” with whom I fell in love – a tall Edwardian girl, with straw hat, ringlets, floral dress with sash and apron to her calves – smelling lilies – in a garden in bloom, not a photograph but a print, copy I suppose – but majestic, hanging above the fireplace at the foot of my grandmother's bed. I would cuddle up in the mornings and rhapsodise about “Spring Blossoms”.

Nanny and her family

My grandmother was a magnificent specimen, tall imposing, beautiful when young; imposing in old age – still six foot high, though with a pronounced stoop, an angular face, full jaw bone, long nose – larger than life in body and voice. She had, I was told, put the fear of god into her children, but must have mellowed into a calm old age, immersed in the escapism of historical novels, brasses, samplers and cats – and a granddaughter who adored her. She was “a character” (my brother Mats’ approving description) – with loud south - east laughter from the gut – and a wicked turn of phrase:

“I wouldn’t have him if his hair hung in diamonds”

“oh gawd, Jack’s back” on the return of her seafaring husband.

“ Chist, Druce has ‘opped it” , her hands held high in a resounding clap - dramatic effects were her forte – as she incorrectly construed the departure of an upright husband deserting one of her umpteen sisters.

They were all good at drama – her seven siblings; Aunt Joan shrieking with laughter; Aunt Doll in her stage whispered gossip; Aunt Nina with her operatic pretensions – until one Christmas the boy Roland pea-shooted into her fully extended mouth incurring incalculable disfavour, family rows and recrimination. They were big on family – loving on their sleeve along with discords, unity and rows.

All epitomised by Christmas down at Mawney road, one of a string of solid Victorian houses, and inside a vast long dining table off a kitchen cave which was rudimentary without fittings, a free standing slab of a gas stove out of the ark. Around the longest table we gathered at Christmas lunch – raucous laughter – not a touch of wine – games in the sitting room – my histrionic side allowed free rein in a house living on the raw edge of shout. In my mother's childhood Christmas had been grander, longer, wilder – with seven siblings in her parents' generation, in the prime of life with numerous offspring. My mother with her four siblings would come down from Cheshire with Nan and Pop and take up residence for the festive season, partying for days with young uncles – playing, playing.

And there were rows, backbiting and complaints – but I was too young to be assailed by the flipside.

Me and Nanny

I came to spend a lot of time alone with my grandmother, Nanny I called her – as my mother went - I don't know that I knew where then, though I'm sure I was told, but now realise in search of jobs, sorting out houses, maybe other things – who knows now that everyone is dead. But my time with Nanny was not unwelcome; there was a cosiness as we sat either side of her small open fire with tomato soup (the tinned variety of course) and bread dipped (sliced white). I loved it as she did herself up immaculately for shopping and lunch down at Mawney Rd – hat and gloves – coat that draped elegantly from her tall shoulders – hair never grey. I knew her intimately, sleeping in her bed, taking tea, biscuits and cat with us to bed – the snore, cough, hair net, lacing herself with a struggle into boned corsets that were capable of free standing as sculptures of a human torso – her tall boned skeletal frame with a soft flesh loose on it. The tedium, but comfort of the afternoon nap where we both had to lie on the sofa and I would be berated as a

“fidget ass”. Had she eclipsed my mother? Well a little perhaps like grandparents do – the alternative indulgent authority – perhaps a little more because there we were together. But that didn’t mean I didn’t miss my mother, her freshness, her scent, her youthful good looks, her smile that lightened a room, her love of me.

Viz – late one night when she returned from one of her trips, rushing up the stairs into Nanny’s backroom where I was sleeping. I woke to all her bustle and beam and, with arms outstretched, welcomed her with what between us became the immortal phrase: “ it’s my Mummy”.

Mummy, Daddy, wars and fantasy

In replaying this scene in my mind when I was older – I likened the reunion to the film “Carve her Name with Pride”, based on a real life resistance woman returning at night with her officer from a French mission. Home to her parents’ house, the same south east, lower middle class background as my grandmother, the house in Mawney road a mirror image. Running up stairs to a sleeping daughter: “hello, darling, it’s Mummy”, seizing, cuddling. All uttered

in upper middleclass tones – war- time social mobility – ditto my mother. Our heroine was in uniform, my mother was not – but they shared the same fitted suit, hairstyle, shoulder bags, crisp alertness, competence, latent sexiness – social aspirants, the world was theirs. My love affair with my mother lasted my childhood. And I had the army uniform in my father –the khaki, the sword, the pistol – most of all I was taken with the diagonal leather across his chest and round the waist; like the army officer admirer of our resistance heroine – driving her home in a black taxi after their sojourn fighting in France: power, uprightness, manliness, decency.

Black taxis, ships, trains – their noise and smoke, comings and goings – absence, uniting – nights and excitement – that was the jumbled texture of my life as a child and I became addicted to it.

But my father's uniform was only worn in Sweden. The one occasion it was brought across the North Sea was for my wedding – the full fig, sword and all. Other than that I must be content with his perfect gentleman civy street clothes. He would travel with immaculate luggage, suits and shoes glorious in quality and quantity. Perfect gentleman manners, he had command of the

wine lists, waiters deferred rather than sneered – he could order respect without fuss.

Then there was the coronation down at Mawney road – the extended family in front of their one and only television – when he stood to attention during the national anthem. “Oh Sven, how lovely”. My mother’s family adored him.

The big push – social climbing – the Titans

Despite his social facility my father did not provide my mother with the established upper middle class rung of respectability from which to fly. They climbed the social pile together, both first generation out. He was the son of a railway station – master, one of the lower middle classes. They had lived in half a house, a modest respectability reflected in a Salvation Army connection with one of his uncles having been posted to India. My father had joined the real army at eighteen and risen to become a colonel, receiving education, persona, status through the military’s structured ambience that included a streak of benevolence and paternalism towards its aspirants.

My mother's rise was more of a spectacle, not in its culmination but because of the struggle – her advance created more emotional waves and personal myths.

Her father was a decorated war hero of World War 1. A sergeant, he was swiftly made an officer as gentlemen were in short supply as a consequence of the carnage. But after the war he reverted to the comfort of shared class, declining the officers' annual reunion, preferring instead to drink with the sergeants. He was Cheshire water mill owner, small fry, but self - employed in a romantic setting. My mother would spend her Saturdays at the mill, roaming the stream and fields, escaping her four siblings. Then the mill foundered, went bust in the late thirties. The family of five children was scattered to the winds. The eldest swiftly married and went to live in Glasgow where she sheltered an errant mother who had run away with her sailor and found herself homeless staying at the YMCA. The only son was cushioned in RAF Bomber Command - but killed in his first flight out over France. Another daughter went into the WAFS in a vain search for a husband. The youngest at fourteen was farmed out to Aunt Doll in Mawney Road – lonely and rebellious, she wrote a critical diary and caused family uproar. That was the stuff of life then, displaced populations.

My mother was alone at seventeen lodging with relations and then solo in freezing conditions with a gas fire that dwindled to a flicker. She fought her way to university with scholarships, scrimping and ambition. Made it to London's Queen Mary College down the Mile End Road, as I remember her recollecting in a cracked voice at a funeral oration to an erstwhile university friend. And then there was the social learning – evacuated to Cambridge, repudiating humiliation, she was gently tutored by the manners of genteel dons and wives; but despite brilliant results in the civil service exams, was turned away in favour of the old established social elite. The makeover would be a lifetime's work, though she was well on her way by the time I was born.

My parents were driven by their extraordinary unrelenting ambition. Fighting, striving, the post war social plates shifted. They were of a different order, another breed – Titans both.

Love of my mother's myth

My mother's myth began to take hold on me in those early years, not explicitly, but she had a presence that I loved and revered. Slowly and at every opportunity as I became a comprehending ear, she let me know her story – again and again from her unhappy childhood – her salvation in her father, the love of water at the mill – her times alone, times at parties – her fights to aspire, to survive hard times – her loves and lovers. They slipped into my being like a second self that I lived in, a front row spectator, audience participator in her drama.

There were times when we were inordinately close. When she was dying and I was babbling to give sounds for her last point of consciousness as the nurses told me to do, I went through the good times, and this memory from when I was two, three or four sent shivers of contentment through me through me as it had done all those years ago in my infancy.

We were on board a ship of the creaking old country house afloat variety. It had been the usual rush to catch the boat at Tilbury, the hallmark of my mother as a centre of a whirl of activity. Now we were to refresh ourselves – before or after dinner, I can't remember, all I remember is the bath and engulfing water –

Mummy and me in the hold of the ship – water raged outside as the ship slid into the swell of the North sea rocking gently in the pit of my stomach like a large cradle – inside water was contained in a cream bathroom with the thick paint of ships, indestructibly solid plumbing system for a mausoleum of a bath, enormous old fashioned taps, the water thundering out of them with billows of steam. We bathed together in wonderful union, the umbilical cord roping us together as if it had never been severed, my mother's large, powerful and loving flesh – an enveloping comfort.

Do I have vivid memories of these two episodes of uniting and reuniting – the bath on the boat and the return of Mummy to my arms in Nanny's house – because I did not get enough closeness from her otherwise? I don't think from our later life together that that was the case, but perhaps her absences caused more anxieties than I have acknowledged over the years. Or perhaps it was because one only registers intimacy in change – I have no recollection of the nightly puttings to bed, food preparation, daily kissing and cuddling, but they must have taken place as we were together alone for years. Yet I remember everyday images with my grandmother, the soup, the market , Mawney Road. Is it the fate of mothers' daily kindnesses/duties to be blanked?

Nomads

Perhaps it was the chopping and changing of where we lived that took away my ability to transpose everyday memories with my mother back in time, which I could do with life in my grandmother's house – the place that was always there. Whereas the other places from my infancy were ephemeral, here today and gone tomorrow – I don't think we made it to a year in any one house. My mother's teaching jobs took us round the country, as they fitted in the tug of war of her ever shifting desire to live in either England or Sweden. We were North Sea nomads.

Southwold by the sea was the first port of call that hardly exists in my memory. The classy girls' public school St Felix took my mother on to teach English, - but the photographs of me are far from classy. One standing on a sea front bench aged two, with a look of Scandinavian gloomy contemplation – '50s dowdy jumper and skirt and knickers descending to my knees. Another is of me in the distance pushing a dolls' pram on a built up road toggled in a dark coat and hat – the greys, black, white all turning to the

melancholy yellow of an old photograph. Who looked after me while my mother taught or where we lived (it must have been a cheap flat or digs), I don't know.

But in Worcester – a year down the line, while the home we lived in is the missing page, the person who looked after me is clearly lodged in my memory. Big bonnie, easy Aunty Thelma with two children of her own and comfy lunches, in whose home I nested while my mother taught at the Alice Otley - another classy outfit. I can remember the kitchen, its table, and a garden, where there's a picture of us – me alongside the children and Thelma with her broad apple face, bosom and wavy light hair.

Birmingham was where we landed last – before home and dry in Hereford. And there the memories, though few of Mummy, come through the fog. After briefly living alone in some tiny rooms, we moved in with a professor and his family – the wife a colleague of my mother's at the esteemed Edgebaston High school for Girls, where I also went as a tiny in its nursery wing. Catering for four to eighteen year olds, the whole school complex was enormous and scary – and it was where I cut my knee open – hideous gore - on a climbing frame.

Their house was a big pile in posh Edgebaston – and there they lived in spectacular squalor – with the wall paper falling from the walls, the practicalities of aesthetic enhancement being beneath these cerebral scientists, communists; their concerns were engaged in higher things – as their children delighted in telling me. We lived as a family, extraordinary really, but rather as poor relations, and I was the youngest. In their ideal society we were the “others” in the “some were more equal than others”.

But it was company – a collective. There was zing. We romped in the enormous garden, holidayed, visited the professor in his lab, saw how glass was blown, swam in the municipal pool, ate mounds of chips and toast. Never lonely.

In contrast, in Hereford in the years before my mother’s remarriage we were alone and I felt it – even after the marriage until my step-brothers came along.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a living unexorcisable membrane round chunks of my life.

Later, when I went to visit my father, the screech of silence in the air – if I did not speak there was no sound – no voices off – no background hub and spectacle of human exchange. With just two of us the relationship was too intense and thin. There was either one to one speech or blank. I couldn't sleep at night for the loneliness – he had to come and share my room. So too when my mother remarried and I was thrown out of her bed to make way for a new companion. Rationed to one night a week with her. Sleepless for six nights out of seven – I thought I was going to die – the nights terrorised me.

Alone with Mummy in Hereford, her melancholy seeped from the walls of the basement and attic flats we shared, both in lovely old houses – one where Elgar lived and experimented, and the other a mansion with stable and grounds – hangers-on in some small part of a grand estate. Once ill at home with a cold in the basement – solitude at its extreme in the quiet and my mother giving me boiled

egg yolk on a metallic spoon so that with the salt made it taste like blood.

I am playing with the children of the mansion. They are in their early teens (I am their junior), with swinging 1950s pony tails and record players that were small and smart, not like my wind up cronk – and a TV sporting Richard Green as Robin Hood that I could watch. One afternoon companionship turned sour. The frosts of girls at play with their cliques and moods. I returned upstairs to the flat where my mother was sitting at the sewing drawer. She brought me into the comfort of a task together.

“Come and help me – leave them alone for the afternoon.”

So I did, sharing the loneliness between us. I could feel her weekend solitude hanging in the air. The sorting and ordering of reels of cotton, buttons, ribbons and pins in a still room – I was half comforted, half breathless to escape.

And when I was leaving Sweden there was the guilt of wanting to escape my father’s last supper for the two of us entombed in his

flat, half grieving at leaving him for another year, half out with the children below shrieking:

“Clem, kom ut och leka...” “Clem, come out and play ...”

Which I did and went wild with bikes between the trees, shifting the burden with the hysteria, laughter and violent play.

A loneliness that was assuaged by travel. Lying in the back of the car in the night on our frequent travels from Hereford to London, Hereford back to Birmingham. My mother and her life quarantined in the front seat. I had the night, the sky, the moving silhouetted shapes detaching me from anxiety and churning my insides like riding the roundabout or big wheel – free will gone, released.

Alison in Wonderland at the bottom of a well – losing myself in sleep and the chug of wheels and machinery in motion, eating the road and sweeping the sky.

Another Daddy

“If, only if, you were to have another daddy – no of course, no-one could replace Daddy – but if Daddy wasn’t there – who would be best – Uncle Ted, Uncle Nick, Uncle John?”

“But I don’t want anyone else.”

“No. I know Darling – and you aren’t going to.”

But uncles I did have. Life had spasms of loneliness, but wasn’t dull. My mother vibrant, flirtatious, could attract men – and she was amoral in the sex game during that time of her life when she was young and pretty.

And I was sucked into the highs and lows, into the myths and dramas of my mother’s whirlpool. Sex wasn’t discussed in those early years, the talk was in terms of who was nice, who was nasty. The brigade were mostly old university friends: Uncle Nick was easy, loved me. Uncle Ted was frosty, fat and disdainful; Uncle

John humorous and played the violin. Over the years as I grew up she let me into the web of the relationships.

Ted: - she became feverish, nervous with anticipation whenever we drew up to his bachelor pad in an old Victorian villa for university graduate students set in luxuriant grounds. I remember a vast room with piano and grandeur – papers and books scattered – Ted large like his room, a thick stretch of grey hair across his square forehead – large angular features, dark eyes sunken by chain smoking – gravelly voice from the bottom of the lung with a cutting edge that even a child could pick up – the cadence of dripped sarcasms, and he talked clever, and I sensed a bit nasty – a child's intuition – it was certainly implied by my mother's behaviour in his oppressive presence, acting shrill, nervously projecting herself. She was besotted with him, but for him it was cat and mouse; with little interest in women, he wouldn't let her go. She was in thrall to her fantasies to such a degree that decades later, long after they had been estranged, she went into deep elaborate mourning on hearing of his death before exorcising him – if she ever did. Underwriting my view of him, I associated our visit there with Autumn - I think he picked up a conker for me in the grounds, -Autumn with its hints of cold and the anxieties of the new

academic year, strange faces, efforts, harsh playgrounds and the odd bully.

Nick: - Nick on the other hand treasured me – and I liked him back. Perhaps he was a cool customer who knew a way to a mother's heart was through her child, but I don't think so, and don't want to – his affection was personal to me as a child. Man of the world, travelling academic that he was, he had a sophisticated, cultivated turn of phrase and fulsome address in his attentions and what he wrote. He could pen a fine letter and poem. As go between for their clandestine communication over the years, I witnessed his dogged love for my mother and infatuation with the memory of their youth – pleasure in adoring on his part and being adored on hers. Until the finale when I telephoned from the anonymity of a public phone box shortly after her death, the rain pouring outside in crude pathetic fallacy as I told him of her death. How else would he have known – I promised her I would do it – but I determined it would be the final act in my dance around my mother's loves. He asked to meet me, but I declined as the spectre of becoming her replacement reared its ghostly head.

The man my mother eventually married – my stepfather – made it clear that he did not love me through the many years that we spent together, although he had a sense of duty and built me a beloved boat to which I could escape.

My mother was extraordinarily open with me with her feelings about these men, entanglements and meetings – fit to shock, but for us it was norm, it was part of my life. What shocked me more was to hear at her death that the one who was seriously in the running, where lust and love were reciprocated, – was the one whose intimacy she hadn't revealed to me. Extraordinarily she had to her then husband, my stepfather, whose retrospective jealousy when she died drove him to distraction during a period of grieving madness. He told me how she had had a torrid affair predating him – and had taunted him with the man's sexual prowess. The man was Professor – father of the family that befriended, housed us with them in Birmingham. She had even written of her plotting to take him away from his family. For his part (according to my stepfather), he proposed, with a staggering streak of immorality, that they have a child together – adhering to their marriages and passing the infant off as my mother's legitimate child. Perhaps on reflection that would have been better than dismembering families,

but stunning deceit nevertheless. Fantasy possibly; it never happened. But what did happen – and I can remember it in all my childish innocence – was the flight from London to Stockholm where he delivered me and my mother into my father's hands. (Without his sponsorship it wouldn't have happened; we could never afford flights in those days – only boats). They sat behind on the plane, I in front. There was a communist party connection – that was the business he was on – whether it was chartered by the comrades I don't know, but small as I was – about five – I knew the episode was, shall we say, out of the ordinary.

My father guessed that there was a liaison – as he told me in later years –and I came to know of it through snooping through letters. But not its degree or the exotic nature of its duplicity.

And what of my father – did he compete in the stakes of torrid love? Certainly, there were no 'aunts' – but he had a life long tragedy of theatrical proportions. He had had an unfaithful wife – two indeed, but it was the first one that counted; by the time of the second, my mother, he had become inured. Wife one was by all accounts, and photos, beautiful – and the daughter of the regimental vicar – a social and romantic coup. My mother, an

exotic foreign bird from England with its war credentials freshly in evidence, was a second coup.

He wrapped them both in the cloak of his attentions. What split both marriages may have been different, and perhaps I don't want to speculate. But it was the first union that seared its way into his soul and contaminated us all.

Again the information is largely second-hand – my father 's and mother's version of events. My father and his first wife fought like dogs in the courts – friends were brought in to testify – the courts tussled with their decision over the offspring – Mats bundled to and fro, hid himself in a cupboard - I don't know in which residence. My father got Mats back – against the odds – because of the character of his mother – what she had done – but the daughter, who was too young to be taken away, stayed with her mother – split siblings.

And the repercussions? Christmases with strictly parcelled and argued over times dogged us forever; there was my father's trembling at a first ghastly meeting with the ex-wife – years after at my brother's church confirmation; the chance running into each

other at a café, a stylish salon in Gothenburg to which as a child of eight I was a witness – the chandeliers bristled with discomfort – as we ate our coffee and cakes across the room. And the effect on my father of the catastrophe was as with the Ancient Mariner – except it was largely to himself that he told the story over and over again – spilling over occasionally into articulation to me, my aunt, my mother.

According to him, my father's first wife had an affair with his best friend during the war. Away on manoeuvres in the north, he was tipped off and confronted the clandestine escapees late at night at the station from which they were about to embark a train and escape. The excruciating drama beggars belief – thankfully no pistol. My father and his mother in law were left with two children and the obligations of a soldier in wartime.

Moguls of the heart, my parents' inflated love lives took me utterly along in their wake – dramatic feed to a scavenger of emotions – living in reflections.

Being different.

Even at an early age at the start of school I tried to establish my identity by trading off difference – not the difference of my mother’s affairs or my fathers’ tragic cuckolding – not then, though I brought that parental drama into play in later years; after all it was a magnificent feast of personal history babble. No, at the beginning, my first school playground persona aged five or so, the difference was of being Swedish. I went into histrionic raptures over a deep frost on the hardcore of a pinched church school playground that first Autumn term in Hereford, glorifying in frost – this was miniature snow. I got hold of a little plastic man on plastic skis the size of my hand that I ran along the frost jagged railings, and the slithery floor, demonstrating to teacher and pupils a world I knew away from here.

“Sweden means a lot to you dear – you miss it, don’t you?” A kindly teacher, a Miss Bickerton, played the game – and drew me out.

Swedish returns

Sweden gave me the pleasures of difference, and we, mother and daughter, went back at intervals that seemed like lifetimes then.

There I had the ease of my relationship with my father – one of unthreatening kindness that lasted a genuine lifetime. Once in a fight, my husband hurled the relationship at me – as stretching the bounds of acceptability – but that it never was – warmth or de-sexed chivalry would be my best description.

Then there was the last Christmas en famille when I was seven years old, I'm left with distinctive memories, but we recently unearthed the cine film which has eerily crystallised things. Cine cameras, they were status and state of the art in the fifties and my aunt had got one on the back of the success of her hair dressing salon.

There were the red goblets on the Christmas table that were magnetic images of my aunt's apartment that were to typify the table settings of a childhood, for I was often there in future years. I thought I would never see them again yet there they were caught like pinned butterflies on film in a setting perfected for Christmas

dinner. Chandelier above – shiny wooden floor beneath – silver, candles flooding the shadows in this hall of a Bergmanesque reception room with a vault of a ceiling.

We must have come by ship to Esbjerg, overland across Denmark to the family home in the south of Sweden and a dragon of a grandmother ('Farmor') joined at the hip to a sweet harassed aunt, who was to be a Swedish mother to me in years to come – the core of a small divorce riven family. It was the place where my father grew up. How many times was I to take that route, to walk the vast boulevards - everything was built so solid, big and empty in Sweden – women muffled with a full fig of fur, men hatted in the cold and small shadowy figures dwarfed in the space of municipal grandeur, the roads so wide, the buildings massive – walking into my aunt's apartment – the front door required a Herculean effort from a child to open and the steps wide and marbled – the hall smelt the refreshing, warming, sweet smell of every Swedish home, a nasal memory that eludes description.

Everyone was there – my half sister, the one my father hadn't fought for. She was considered 'too young' to leave her mother by the divorce court. Bespectacled, squinting, plain, neither mother

nor father had valued her compared with their show piece Mats. But I didn't know about any of that. We lay on put-up beds in the hairdressing salon part of the apartment and laughed till we wet ourselves – figuratively. Mats - a lack lustre adolescent Father Christmas delivered our presents.

And my parents, there they are together on film side by side on the sofa – being seated at the same dining table – uncanny to see that the togetherness genuinely was so – not the starchiness of side by side in a photograph, but laughing over a game of cards. Her's a petalled laughter for the screen, his shoulders and jowls going up and down in the military rhythm that I remember so well. He in chequered lounge suit with waistcoat – aging elegance – she in a black chiffon dress belted skirt, sloping shoulders, hair in a triangular bob of the fifties, and an open neck to her bosom where a pink rose lodged. Their limbs intertwined in the proximity of a game of cards, and reclining on the sofa. Not that their eyes exchanged glances – why should they in the space of that short footage of film. The only significance of that non-engagement being the sequence to it seared in my brain sans film – of my mother crying on the train that was to take us back across

Denmark, to the sea and the grey of England. And my father taking me on one side asking me to look after her.

“If he had just said, don’t go then, I wouldn’t have gone!” she declaimed in victim basking mode in one of her many self examinations to me as counselling ear in years to come.

But with the kindness or cruelty of reticence, he let her go. – and she went, in essence for good.

Oh, there was a final meeting in the summer, when an alternative husband had been found. A letter would not do – there was decency and a bond. I was not privy to the act - was not told what was to befall. Ostensibly my father had come for a holiday. I did not question why he slept in my room and not in hers, but a child’s antennae picked up the discomfort of his arrival – the vinegar, shiftiness and embarrassment of their tones – he was unpacking, I was hovering in attendance:

“..oh she’s only waiting for the present.”

My father's uncharacteristically awkward joke with more than a hint of bitterness. I was bitten, but more so when my mother slapped him down disproportionately, loudly, angrily –

“don't be so unkind to the child!”

“I wasn't”

'The child', and the child in between the words – hidden agendas that were detected even in my immaturity.

The whole wretched episode of those last few days together when they were splitting is typified in my mind by horror of the film of Treasure Island – stockades and betrayal, the film was too grown up, too scary for my tender years. I was visited in consequence by insomnia peculiarly linked to the unfriendly lino floor in my room, padding the cold to the loo, but the worst was when I did sleep in the middle of the night, a crescendoed nightmare descended leading to my being handed the black spot by Blind Pugh. What the spot was – living contagion or what – I didn't know, despite my father's efforts to explain.

But that Christmas in Sweden was the summer before the dark.
Most spectacularly, I danced before the camera with some streamers and in the sweetest, bluest dress and my hair with a black sheen – holding onto the remnants of a ‘Chinese baby’ look. Face aglow with histrionic awareness.

The actress within

Dressing, dressing, dressing, painting myself in the mirror – scrutinising front, sideways. Laying the table to perfection – silver, napkins in a fan tortuous design. And it was not just for celebrating occasions like Christmas, but just when three or four of us were collected together in my father’s house – in the years after the divorce – brother, sister, aunt, friends when we would feast in style – and even a deux, father and daughter, we would change for dinner – something to strain for, something to present for. I loved it about him, the ceremony in him, a genetic mantle that slipped itself over me.

Gentle flattering dresses that slipped over my head and young growing body. There was the red bubbly thread dress, the red

shirt dress and best of all a blue shading to white slip of a 1930s flapper dress that I wore at age fourteen when Marie and I went to a diner dance – sitting like fragile birds at the edge of the floor. I was asked to dance by a good looking man who must have been twice my age - I fled from him after a dance back to my sister – but held onto the trophy of a stylish night in the elegant room, the white wine and West Coast salad, my forsaken potential lover whom I kicked myself for ditching – and the precious dress.

The painting of my face became a growing ritual – from lipstick and a powder puff to liquid makeup mask and black surrounded eyes.

While my father would manicure to perfection and wear Old Spice, a fragrance that I tried to impose on a lover in later years to no avail. Shirts, ties, hair, all honed to an incomparable standard.

We would meet for cocktails - gin martini, black caviar hors d'oeuvres would start the night revels –and, if guests, many glasses – beer, snaps, wine, sherry, liquors.

He told me that in the post divorce years he had dressed for his solitary dinner every night – to hold onto his fragmentary joy and not to despair.

A return to the Swedish north

Skip a few years and there was an episode where we, father and daughter, went back to the north of Sweden. Back fleetingly to the Swedish military stronghold of my early childhood, it's summer holidays and treats. The anticipation overwhelming as we climb to our sleeping quarters in a solid mausoleum of a train that could take batterings of snow and ice. No snow now - it was a twinkle star summer evening for me and my father in the middle of the national holiday time month – communal summer freedom and recreation.

I painted my lips pale to blend with the hues of muted blue of a dress that shaped a gazelle body. The pleasures of a look that reflected in the pleasure in my father's eyes as I swung down the train.

The train was as spacious and solid as the boulevards of Malmo. The restaurant car white lined , semi-lit with lamps, solid with good taste – waited on - and a father and daughter pictured in the black window as we careered through forest wastes – framed in sashed curtains, dressed – he to perfection – she pretty much so.

“You’re looking so lovely, they’re looking at you.” , he nodded at fellow passengers. Gallant to his daughter. And I believed him – it was probably true – as I beamed out of my self conscious posture and excited, youthful face.

And we drank wine, heady with the place and feel of the heavy plates and cutlery on a table cloth. Then gloriously stepping between clean white cotton ironed sheets – to sleep with the rock of the train, bunkered and half awake, half dreaming through the night.

Arriving the next day, in a small town in a northern summer. A well - proportioned matron – tall, commanding, endearing clasped us to her bosom as we descend the red carpet of a train stairway to the platform, to the thick sweet smell of forests cooked on the melee of rain and sunshine that is a Swedish summer.

“How are you my little ones, lilla Sven, lilla cher Clem – little Sven, little dear Clem.”, she hugged us, commanded us to be happy – a love that enveloped my father’s life with its bossy goodness and classy style. Unattainable until her husband Tord died and then when she was available she repudiated my bereft father. Bereft of Tord his comrade in arms – and his comrade’s wife, he died a year later.

But on this happier day Tord was also standing at the station – genial Pickwickian – with a fine square head and thick wavy white hair – watery eyes that matched my father’s - if ever a man had a twinkle in his eye it was he. My father commented that he flirted with me and I was gratified that he did. Intoxicated.

It was a return to the haunts of infancy. The place of my Swedish childhood, this small garrison town in the forests – bears and soldiers – water and logs swamping the water stripped of branches lunging unpredictably down, occasionally a leg of wood shooting skyward in the mess of wood and water.

A place of parties – no officer’s mess for me this time – the town and soldiers were summertime sleepy. Instead we enjoyed the manor house next door and the patronage of our hosts lady and keeper of the manor Gullan and Tord, whom I adored. They had known and nurtured my mother when she had lived there, but years later she repudiated them in the bad temper thrown up by the preparations for my wedding:

“..it is my party; they are my guests and they will fit in with us.”

My mother would out-party and out-patronise them. But for now she was content that I should be indentured to Gullan for a few weeks in the summer to learn the ways of a lady as she had been during her sojourn as a Swedish officer’s foreign, aspiring and lonely wife.

Kitchen rituals – Gullan inducted me – fish gutted – cream spooned, spiralled - tables adorned with a mass of bits and pieces even for family lunch. Dinner a work of art and correctness – the serviettes twirled to pinnacles in the tallest glass of the array that greeted each diner as they sat to repast.

A sword fencer arrived to add to our small company. He was fencing for a tournament, and Tord in his sixties was coaching him. A curious picture - this sixty something man of indulged appetites – a rotund stomach but a rigid straight back held erect against the pull of gravity. The younger man was not good looking, but added something to our Chekhovian party of difference, of edge, of attention for my attention seeking youth.

The Northern lights still strong catching the grass and sprinkling of silver birch across the manor house garden. We ate late after fastidious drawn out preparation. There was ceremonial fore, during and aft – we drank and ‘skalled’ from aperitif to snaps, beer, wine, sweet wine, brandy. And Gullan left me with the men to talk into the early hours. Histrionic, I held forth radical in this hot bed of conservatism and entertained; they flirted and indulged.

My wedding and other parties

My wedding was another tableau some decades later. Portentous, honed in the image of my father’s class aspiration, not in terms of scale (we were a small gathering – friends sans family), but in style; boys out of college were toggged up in dinner jackets and

white ties, girls silhouetted in their ball gowns. Swedish formality and aggrandisement imprinted on this dark, yew bedecked English country churchyard, lost dank under wet trees by the floods of the river Wye, that was more used to the understated for the few weddings it ever saw.

I lent on the arms of a Swedish colonel in full fig, a sword hanging from his waist held with gold braid - kissed on the hand – he had given me a swig at the house before we left. We went along the short aisle, I wore a gold Swedish wedding crown on my black hair and a train as long as my fantasy; the vicar admiring, smiled an engaging welcome and whispered:

“Clem there is so much of you...”

The wedding reception was in the dining room of the Edwardian house to which my mother had graduated in her middle age with lawns that looked out over the river Wye. It was home grown elegance and panache, a blown-up dinner party that my mother led from the front and in which I partook with histrionic emulation. Her husbands old and new were subjugated as she insisted on

taking the floor and laid them low with her opening remarks
mimicking the Queen with a male harem:

“My husbands and I...”

She had led them the night before in a united cavalry charge to an unsuspecting Bishop of Hereford in complaint about the vicar due to preside at my wedding. The vicar it turned out was hostile to the married state following his wife’s desertion. Extraordinarily he had suggested to my mother that marriage was the price men paid for sex. He then proceeded to insult my prospective husband, reducing him to tears at the wedding rehearsal.

Hysteria prevailed. We would call the wedding off, hold a mock one in the garden, god knows what. But my mother’s nerve held and, husbands in tow, she took her demand for a replacement to the Bishop, succeeded and added to the annals of family legend.

Radical causes

Radical causes set another stage from which my mother could exhibit in a manner not very different from this display, nor indeed

far from my fathers posturing as a Swedish knight. All gestures in an indifferent world.

As parties go, the election party of 1966 in our house by the lake was something. Punch swilling and fuelling the celebration of the radical professionals filling our home - that strange little group, valiant band in an entrenched Tory fiefdom of a Welsh marches backwater. The previous election I'd been photographed on the knee of Robin Day journalist celebrity and bussed in liberal candidate with a paroxied girl friend who was put on the next train back to Paddington for the good of the party and the preservation of the decency of local males.

This time, when I was twelve, we went the whole hog and had a Labour candidate as the celebrity at my mother's party – Mrs Dalloway of the radical fringes. Bussed in by Transport House, he drew her social, intellectual and moral scorn, but was a focal point for our party.

And Labour got it right that time, a victory in the country at large if not in the sticks.

Torch bearer

I carried the torch of her radicalism to school. Swanked in up the school drive with banners and a gaggle of radicals, tentative interested parties and onlookers watching in a kind of wonderment at this curious divergence from their parents' orthodoxy. We were light headed, loud with self importance and heady on the air of liberation. The country had swapped a "you never had it so good", frumpy, wicked conservative establishment for a principled, freer, white light of technology future.

And there was more on the skirt tails of my mother in the radicalism and sexually charged era of her middle years. Dr Deighton frequented our house during her campaign against the horrific maternity services of the fifties and sixties that put women through hell; countless examples of degradation and ineptitude. The unkindness she'd experienced in Sweden was manifest in England and meted out in abundance to working class women – stories of slapping, neglect and unsparing pain were catalogued, - and woven into our household along with Dr Deighton's flirtation with my mother; an outrage that tickled her ego and incensed my

stepfather. The whole thing gave us the edgy excitement and anxiety of the outside world somehow easing its way into ours.

I came home once to a television presenter being entertained in the big sitting room, in front of the wall of glass window that overlooked the lake and trees beyond, lawn in the foreground, where I staged my after school recreation for his benefit, drawing self consciously the sting of his glance in my direction. But the floor belonged to Mummy as she appeared on television and sojourned to London from the sticks, mixing with the raffish world of the sixties media to plug humane maternity services. She returned in full headlight bustle late one night as my stepfather and I sat supping on hard plastic canteen chairs post some worthy film or other with the Hereford film club of twilight professionals. They were moths to her flame; she plied them with tales of lewd journalists and adulterous overtures, a Chekhovian heroine safe back from Moscow.

The crusades of her middle years were exhilarating - a striving persona in the peopled, bustled social melee of her time. Latterly when she was older, they took place against the backdrop of a cold universe beckoning beyond the grave. The nuclear site at

Greenham Common – women bussed in to rage. My mother grey haired, wrapped in the blanket of benevolence and old age altruism. There is a heart-warming craziness about causes at the close of life. She delivered well that cameo of human futility.

Drinking champagne, she careered through the night on the subterranean Channel train, through the recently dug tunnel, to an art exhibition par excellence, as arterial sclerosis tightened its grip. She had just denied herself paying for private NHS queue jumping for a life extending operation to loosen the throttle hold of angina.

“I’m a 1945 socialist”, she charmed the physician with her self denying ordinance, and the twinkle in her eye, bravery and theatre in her fear. She gave him the reassurance of principle, and for a fragment of time shored up his terrors in the face of the swamp of human fragility. Unintended on her part, the charm secured for her the fastest possible route to a free operation. It was a heart bypass of major proportions, but in the days of less well developed surgery it didn’t work as it would now; a wave of utter despair engulfed us when we realised, - still it gave her five, albeit anxious years, grace.

Mummy and dying

Five years up and her dying was a catastrophic wrench for her group of friends – one of the early ones to go – and the most colourful – amongst the fellow travellers that held onto a common rope through child bearing to child departing , middle and old age – as England changed its political allegiances from social concern to social denial. Well at least she was able to rejoice at the demise of the worst of the right wing bigotry before her own death - she regaled the telephones of Herefordshire and Gloucestershire with delight at the defenestration of Prime Minister Thatcher.

Her friends tugged onto her memory in a small church on a forlorn Cotswold hillside – pathetic fallacy with cold March air in lungs as songs were sung to her and memories spoken of by those taking the floor at the side of the pulpit:

“Oh Daph how did you do it – how did you do so much, the energy where did it come from?” An erstwhile female admirer – more than friendship – and stories flowed.

“If Daphne, despite her non - believing, has found herself in the astonishing position of looking down from a cloud now, she would command us...”

“The best humanist funeral” – a church warden told me clinging to the scene and an acquaintanceship with my mother who had been an odd centrifugal force even in a staid Cotswold village. They collected in a dank churchyard lost on a hillside – the blue of the grass; fragile skins drawn over tired bones, the troupe of erstwhile fighters for some good cause or other, alone with their mortality, their rounded shoulder curvature in symmetry with the hill in which the grave was dug. They mourned her extraction from their lives. Is it in death that you finally get the attention you deserve – craved when you were living?

Dying and fame

Often attention eludes even in death, but I was unaware of that at age seven and thought that dying would bring me fame – as I sat at my hard-bitten school desk, sweated into, engraved with the despair of its incumbents, fit to compete with the graffitied

desperation on a prison wall. There were exhilarating times in that convent where I was weekly boarded to free up my separated mother's search for a lover. This was one of those episodes as a nun, snappy and disconsolate in her middle years, lapped up and shared with us kids the bulletins through the day of the protracted dying of a colleague's mother. A sister must have gone from class to class imparting the news, morning and afternoon bulletins for days it seemed.

"Oh Mother of God – have mercy on the poor woman." Our protectress offered in prayer.

I was agog at the solemnity of it all. Something which she, in her flapping robes, and I had in common; we were fellows in the histrionics of the occasion.

There was the dark stuff of children's fabulation in that Victorian house and grounds for some eighty pupils. Self-imposed penances in the school yard, children hopping up and down, hands tied behind their backs. The sister who harassed me in the toilets proclaiming the evils of my parents' separation, and damnation for those who did not attend mass on Sunday – strictures for our

secular household where no one ever darkened a church door. We lived the fantastic stuff of childhood, the half real world of dragons, ghosts, chivalry, death and sin – princesses in our white veils for prayer. How I loved those white veils and the tableau of us shrouded infants in a chapel of mysterious smells, damp and incense, dark corners and confessional holes. The nuns had a vast material and spiritual presence, hidden in black tents from which their white moon faces peeked out.

And the funeral of the woman who was the subject of the classroom bush news - when God finally took her to his bosom – was an affair of ritual that seized me by the throat, less to cry than to experience awe as the school's host filed into the church to pay homage to a person encased in wood – an adulation which struck to the core of my being as that to which I aspired, not to give, but to receive; I wanted to swap places with the resident of the coffin. Telling the scene to a lover later in life, he considered it essence of Clem, though with little knowledge on which to base the statement – an odd perspicacity.

Naughtiness

It was a characteristic that permeated a string of naughtiness transmogrified with age, and consequent gravity, into a streak of rebellion.

In my infant school aged six I rang the school bell with the intent and magical outcome of drawing the entire school from its play to class assembly. Children ran, lines formed, chatter quelled ready for class. I reflected in amazement at my infantile power. With fear of the Lord of Misrule in their breasts, the teaching staff made me stand by the bell for a week during play. A small price to pay.

At the convent there was a rickety grid that covered a manhole beneath the hallowed, private precincts of Reverend Mother's receiving rooms. The rickety grid had to be stepped on to be able to see into that mysterious power den. I stepped – leading a gaggle of children to thoughts of transgression. The grid gave way, the ground opened up and I fell into the pit unable to get out, surrounded by the scared, admiring faces of my co-conspirators. Adult rescue and retribution the price.

There was the time I was laden with the trophy of a prize collection of birds' eggs loaned to me by a prospective step-father, ingratiating his way with a recoiling child. These treasured eggs I distributed as danegeld amongst the older convent girls to win their approbation. They were older bullying girls into whose dormitory I had been removed for the sake of my peers, removed from entertaining, contaminating girls of my own age with terrifying stories and fantasies after lights out. There were ructions from parents over the storyteller and from my mother on behalf of her lover over the loss of eggs. I was summoned to a row with the head nun. And so it continued throughout school – always with mitigating endearments though, so I was never wholly branded.

“It wasn't good, no ..” she breathlessly framed their presentation to an anxious child as mother and step-father swept through the door on returning from a parents' evening with the teachers of the school that was to embrace me for ten years until unleashed at eighteen. The bustle and suppressed volubility of my mother's voice denoted that things had gone badly.

“I couldn't believe it was you. We went from teacher to teacher hearing about this mythical girl - a you we didn't know.” In

summary it emerged that while at home I was an angel, at school a demon. But a demon of modest proportions, - even endearing to a degree.

The misdemeanours were not of any gravity – with one exception and that exception had had little to do with the school and didn't come to the attention of the authorities, but if it had done all hell would have broken loose.

It took place in the graveyard that was the subject of my habitual gaze through classroom windows. Looking out at the stones of departed souls transported me from classroom tedium, left me free to contemplate the mysteries of life – and death – an early tendency to morbidity and curiosity. There was a fascination with fantasy and the elevation of transgression of a cinematic, romantic kind. I saw myself as a runaway, Huckleberry Fin or a cavalier boy fleeing roundhead oppressors. Present was ditched for the past; blood, swords and civil wars, male ruffs and ringlets, fancy dress, fancies that wove thrillingly into my daily living of the same pedigree as the roman catholic veils and coffins. An engagement with death at a tender age. What does a dead person look like? Skeletal, flesh waxen, utterly other than me as I am now sitting on

my chair at my desk with the teacher, engaged with my twenty nine peers. I, the thirtieth, distanced through the window, down the hill on which the school sat, to the multiple greens, the variegated grasses, trees and stones of a pretty graveyard.

Pretty enough to fit into my romantic imaginings from the traditional song *The Ash Grove*... “In yonder green valley where streamlets meander when twilight is fading I pensively rove”... sung in our music class and over and over in my head .

More macabre imaginings led to an escapade in grave digging to see what a dead body looked like. Co-conspirator in tow, we reflected with a degree of practicality that a new grave, with the earth freshly dug so easy to turn, would be easiest –and that a child might be buried nearer the surface.

Oblivious, unthinking for the grieving families, we were mercifully disturbed in our nefarious mission before many sods were turned. Flinging spades under a nearby tree, we ran for our lives. The school never found out. The spade was collected by my rattled parents, who were silenced by the gravity and peculiarity of the misdemeanour.

For the rest, wrong was not really what I did. Wearing 'ban the bomb' badges to speech day (not a daft thing to do in that era), risqué questioning in class – humanism, radicalism, a little mockery, running down corridors was the habitual mode of naughtiness. And accompanying the naughtiness was writing. Precocity and grandiose endeavour. I ignored the cramping slog of Latin and maths for essays that entertained my adult minders sufficiently for the scripts to be handed round in the staff room for a coffee break collective wry smile and anticipation for the next instalment.

I wrote plays. A cold war drama elbowed religion out of the imaginative frame and I swanked on stage with my stepfather's air force jacket (Russian kit substitute) slung over one shoulder. A portrait of the Profumo scandal with military attaches, prostitutes and communists, corrupted Tory government and high court drama, by a band of new, fresh faced eleven year olds in a rural back water. The ideas, knowledge swirled in immature comprehension, but provided risk entertainment enough for our spinster English staff with their just below the surface suppressed radical bent.

There were other plays such as an exposition of an improbable torrent of guilt experienced by Henry V111's in the wake of ghostly visits by his deposed wives – after Shakespeare. Essays on international government emerged with plans announced to a bus load of girls to become secretary general of the UN. Precocity allowed for the preposterous. The school was kind, tolerant, nurturing where ideas had come ahead of knowledge. An introspection condoned, inflated, in this institution that had the self-assurance to feed rebellious intellect.

And had religion evaporated? Not entirely. The belief snapped, but that streak of religious feeling, ritual practice remained, it had simply mutated into the plays, into poems read in contrived settings – holed by a river that ran at the bottom of the school or trapesing hills. The belief shifted into doubt and a glorification of that, and a lifelong fascination with pushing thought. Poems were crafted in an early flourishing in my pre-pubescent years – somewhat after Shelly: “On Religion”, “On the Meaning of Life”.

And she wanted to keep these poems, my first love. I eleven to her eighteen years, I used to watch her being coached in our

classroom by an English teacher who was a slim man like woman and who, like me, adored her. A passing engagement with my own sex was one of the most passionate of my life.

The object of my affection had eyes of turquoise set in a dark face with black hair, a deep engaging voice, but it was the eyes that excelled, stunned. The whole study in composure. Off to Oxford to read English to act, play the field, - and she took my poems with her. I was stunned with gut wrenching love when by chance or design our paths crossed down school corridors. I would ape the nonchalant, sophisticated way she wore her blazer on one shoulder – she was my cavalier with her cloak, prince of the Welsh marches.

This place of learning with its structures, its confidence, took rebellion – so long as of its ilk – in its stride. Acting out within its walls was unofficially allowed and with a sprinkling of intelligent indulgence from the ladies who taught me, that is what I did.

In that Victorian edifice with a grey slab charm on top of a small town on the Wales borders I found sheltered accommodation for an extravert side. It blossomed but contrasted with an introversion

that was itself honed to the perfection of a tableau in my imagination.

Celebration of solitude

Extra-mural, it was a solitary childhood idyll with a small lake in front of the house, silting up as the unfettered grasses, trees of this estate grew demoniacally productive. A walled kitchen garden run to seed had outhouses jumbled with the debris of by gone living; discoloured rosettes boasting the competitive triumphs of the garden still tagged to the beam; iron fire grates clogged with soot and dead birds and insects; rusted iron stands that took five irons heated to a fury, a torture of sweat and endeavour to those who laundered the estate's clothes. The whole place was cloaked with dust and cobwebs; this was my domain which I started to scrub, but generally was in fantasy, aping the worlds of a melancholy child alone that you found in children's books. The aspiration to dreaming described in books by authors retrospectively, projecting, cloaking ideal in childish form, their escape into mind which I emulated from time to time sitting on the mossed wall looking down at my reflection in a pool of water lilies cupped in grey stone, the whole crumbling with lichen. For a good half hour or

more waiting for what in the end was the thin peppered shadow
lanterned pleasure of having witnessed myself as a dreamer,
Rodin's thinker sitting , legs dangling over the edge, looking
through a pool.

Less precious, in the realms of an active dream was the boat –
snap shot in the early hours before school toggled out in uniform
with gingham, white socks and boater in the middle of the lake,
face turned to the heavens. Hours lost in the inlets, little crags,
landings – fantasising a larger shore. Under the bridge to the far
side, escapades to the island and utter absorption, a solitary child
building a slum in the trees, burning fires and food. But selfish, the
umbilical cord affixed still stuck to home and nurture.

Sometimes, though, the distance became too far. Trousers cut to
the knee, trews, wellies, 1930's jumper, sticks and dreams in hand,
beyond the lake, the island and the cultivated forestation of the
mansion, through the tame grass to the untame. A stream to
follow, scramble, - low slung water meadows, animals to hazard –
until Llanwarn, lower than the lowest meadow – flooded derelict
church – a residual sculpture – eerie, black – lapped with the
darkest of green sodden vegetation.

There was a melancholy too that wrapped up my senses; grasses and stingers an assembly of growth , wet up my legs, with damp chafing above wellington tops at bare knees – the water shadows, the church decapitated sinking to its knees – as green became darker – there were fields, waters, trees to cross – the disappearing light had a portentous dreaminess – a film across the landscape as colours diminished and ran as I ran, washed together. And then there was the tipping point when grey turned to black and I was scared – through the tallest of conifers and beeches that stood shoulder to shoulder in the nearer reaches of the estate – past the mansion with its huge forbidding ovular lawn, a motif of black on black, -to our house and in.

Solitude in later years

Three trees stood on the horizon of the hills beyond our old grey stone slabbed cottage in a village that straggled two sides of a valley. We lay in the shadowy watch of the church, a building similarly hewn of knotted wet stone, lichen mottled rusty grey green, discoloured in a water colour of the tears of its

congregation, living above ground and dead beneath, with its towering beech knocking plaintiff damp at our window.

Thirty years on, my mother moved here in her later years with a second husband and died. I made the repeated pilgrimage, and as soon as maybe on arrival walked across the watered valley bottom, cottages, fields to the hills – the three trees. Removed from the house with its warmth and overheated emotion, walking with the half crying that had engaged my childhood and threaded its way through life, sweet and sour.

Water and trees were the companions of my inner life – a melancholic sharpened sentiment, - not landscape views it seemed; face down in the stream of introspection rather than commanding a vista. Trees had an anthropomorphic reality – dancers, formations, mutilations, the crude mask of summer dress denuded – the skeletal depth of grey on black in a winter walk. Their push against gravity touched me, a colossal energy and futility.

My self induced sadness was cultured I guess from a Swedish twist with solitude. This alter person of my thoughts almost walked

as a companion – even took shape – a disembodied grey ego that I fashioned and loved.

Solitude and the sea

And could translate from trees to sea gazing. I would stand as a child at the rail of the departing North sea ship from Sweden to England, England to Sweden in pursuit of the waves and the grandiosity of liquid emersion, rhythm and apocalypse in froth, the sky darkening reflected in blacker watery shades, dredging my responses. Besieged by an aspiring sensibility, I would stand on a cold deck overlong, shivering in its command, crying to the call of an expectation of devastation as I left my father.

The relief of turning in from the sea to the mundane warmth of carpet pile covering the labyrinths of corridors threading the inside of the ship – running upstairs atop the swell of the sea or flying downstairs with pull of the ship's plunge.

There were times when emotion sufficient to the occasion of separating from my father for a year eluded me. Sitting in the back

of the car as my brother drove us to the ship for farewell, spindly arms wrapped round my father's blazored kindness, kissing him smelling of old spice, the repeated act half drenching me in the depth of emotion – the act took me almost there. But there was a filament of guilt because of inappropriate joy at the prospect of release, of doing rather than feeling - getting into the boat, away, to things that would happen.

Self-induced feelings away from other people inside myself could be colossal and over-powerful. Mirror fixated in the hub of the ship in the cream bathroom, as the suction of the door sealed, with the rumble and sway of the ship taking away the distraction and prickle of the outside world. Looking into the mirror, wanting to see into an emerging soul, looking past irises into the eyes black hole, determinedly inducing face to face and myself beyond until I emerged, the chrysalis breached. Beyond both faces, my own and the reflection, the child stepped out of the body – and, petrified, I turned from electrification. I didn't go moth-like headlong into the light; rather having tasted intensity to a pitch of excitement – I shrank and turned to a non – reflecting wall.

How often did I do that (and when did it stop)? Now en passant with a mirror on an all too fleshy and mortal face, the attempt offers a flat experience. It was a Wordsworthian mountain terror in a ship's mirror; ghosts of youth.

Spying on myself was not always confined to a ship's hide; it happened on occasion in a café in the bosom of the cathedral in Canterbury in my mid twenties. A period of retreat - and engagement with the mirrors image in the ladies room, or in the middle of the flame in the fire in the stone walled tea - room. Late afternoon shadows enveloped, and there I would stare with my tea, scrap of writing, spine curved to the infinitesimal darts of fire.

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Shrinking from attention and a latter day fellow traveller

“I got away with it – I’ve made it to retirement and no-one found me out.”

My dinner companion struck me between the eyes as he responded to a customary pleasantry enquiring about life after work. Not that it is ever post work for an aging academic, but post payroll. His misdemeanour he revealed, as I looked incredulous at the revelation into his grey, mild eyes, was not financial, not even plagiarism, but a profound anxiety.

“Was it social?” I asked.

He confessed that an occasion like this dinner was excruciating. I looked at the antiquities of the Reform Club, tasteful opulence, one or two good paintings; we were at the high table of living, a

resplendent dinner for our party and flunkeys fussed to perfection. But it was more than that, he said, holding me by the scruff of his ancient mariner eye. When he spoke from a platform he was engulfed by rushes of doubt about the validity of himself and anything he said. It left him supplicant, cap in hand to the audience – asking their views; he could not assert a position. And in the quietness and gentleness of his tone, I could believe it.

I turned under the pressure of his pain unsuitably revealed, to draw in our hostess, a plum voiced ex high court judge, isolated at the head of the table. With flippancy I trilled:

“Jane, have you ever been afflicted by self doubt?”

“No, I don’t think so. Of course one had one or two occasions when I wondered whether there was one case when I thought maybe I’d made the wrong decision. But generally one wiped the slate down at the end of the day, otherwise you simply couldn’t go on.”

She was afflicted enough now with the involuntary shakes of old age, but had borne high office with little fear, or even

comprehension of the pit of anxiety in which my friend was sunk. And the magnitude of the feeling beside me was raw, drew me back moth like to flame, to sneak a view at the personal wound – to lick. I wouldn't have called him a friend, but would he become one, or melt away having done his business? In earlier days I would have felt bonded by revelation, but now was wary, - still the remains of wanting to feel flattered crept under the skin.

We talked about the genetic causal possibilities, indeed the condition had passed to his son. “Oh, it had been managed over the years”, but the strain of so doing, day in day out, holding down eminence in his field told in the sad husk of voice and face. (Was it the early evening drink that let it wash over me so lightly?)

Then musical chairs, our hostess commanded movement of men between courses to leaven heavy conversations such as ours or mitigate tedium. I watched him with another dinner companion over the table – switched allegiances, mustering of facial muscles. I wondered whether he was making the same revelations, but somehow doubted it; there was more gusto in his speech than when he talked to me – a girding of loins.

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Waiting, shrinking from attention - youth

I stood by the massive oblong window half the length of the room, a tableau looking out at our rather small lake, trees beyond and the drive curling away from the bridge up through the woods – how many hours, minutes, clocked time past the appointed hour, way past, no car. My college scoop, a man with brown eyes, black hair, good looks sufficient to draw comment from envious friends, had not driven four hours out of London to my country home.

There had been an explanation post hoc, he'd found he'd drawn a second class degree in the finals lottery and lost his academic dream, relegated. And for me sitting in the cup of the window ledge – there was a swirl of strands of conflicted feeling; the chagrin, the grief, the grind of pain, the loss of anticipated event, - but the event itself had not been altogether wanted.

I was fearful of introductions, on the low level of the barometer of fear. Then there was the bishop father of one of his closest friends whom we were to visit, part of the basket weave of fears. But more

precisely it was holding things in my right hand under scrutiny—
raising it from table to mouth; there had been a single episode that
dogged my romantic situation, and I was Tennessee Williams
Night of the Iguana spooked for good.

He had driven us out of London to Windsor; I sat by his side with a
sense of arrival in the scheme of things. I don't know if it was his
car, probably not, but he had the savoir faire to have made
reservations, to have borrowed the car, to drive us out to the
restaurant in the country that was out of our student league; I was
contented with the world – plumed to play as bow to strings across
a violin rib cage.

He escorted me to the restaurant, we sat, I was enthralled – and
then as I lifted my hand with the soup it froze; it shook under the
scrutiny of the white table cloth, glass silver, and the eyes of my
unconsummated lover. Lifelong dogged with a continual replay, I
avoid soup to this day.

“Resurgam” – my mother's motto had wormed its way into my
psyche, not consciously, rather in the genetic thread; so I was
unbowed by my social fears – there were lovers, marriage,

speeches at home and abroad, the thrust of driven existence. In my thirties, forties and fifties the drive took me through a string of civil liberties and social policy causes from fighting an errant police force to advocating new models of welfare; advising New Labour in its heyday, ensconced on Westminster and academic circuits; spouting at conferences at home and abroad. Bustle, self-importance.

But all the time the claw back of the undercurrent of reticence, a conflicted sea creeping, jostling. The counterpoint took its toll, but curiously had its charm, or at least once I was told my conjoined strength and vulnerability was an attraction.

The theatrical pull and contradictory fears

And the pull of the performing gene was strong – had always been. Swedish dinners in my father's home, I delighted in the settings of tables, intricate artistic creations of glass, silver, white cloth and candles, the order of drinks from snaps to desert wine – an ordered universe. My father's dancing with me on New Year's Eve,

both of us fully kitted, clothes to perfection, all feeding the streak in my makeup that was display.

I had a fulfilment of sorts in that little world, that small social whirl, with a fevered anticipation of company, fellow officers, my brother, an assortment of relatives. There was even a soiree at the general's, dressing up with required behaviours and rituals, the prettiness of an in miniature ball snatched from War and Peace. It all satisfied a pitch for show and taste, laced with the elixir of adrenalin. A hankering that was sated too in England by my mother's election night celebrations / mourning – in excess of any expectation of the Labour Party hacks sent up from London. By her Boxing night parties, she swept down the stairs in full gown and called on us to “Look, do I look alright...”. Even Christmas or lesser family events, she swept the floor and hyped our lives. I emulated.

Wherever I lived I ensured that candles bedecked the walls and tables, long before they became vogue. I remember the lit scene being stamped on my early - married life on a miniscule budget in an Edwardian house in Kent, where miraculously we lived beyond our station. The dinners for guests spun on a fragment of money.

Ceremonial, and dressing and a log fire offsetting the cold for the moment of the party, before returning to the single electric bar heater and a pervasive freeze. All under the hallowed auspices of the cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral, whose presence, beauty, largeness and awe fullness cradled a dreamy ego; its wet grey, stone vaults providing a half lit in spirito backdrop to the dressy play and puffed adrenalin that gave a rush of excitement, fear and joy before and after parties; post party, when I would go out into the garden and contemplate the heavens with a cigarette.

Life was a self- created theatrical that jostled, fought and sometimes fused with sheltered thought. It was both a heavenly and a bloody business; god knows, not a marriage in heaven.

Domineering as introversion was, theatre staked its claim. It spilt over from domestic life into the public sphere. Early on there was acting, later speeches. Puss in Boots was the earliest sojourn I recall – at the age of seven. Chosen to be Puss by the Convent nuns – with hat, swaggery and boots, flouncy bowing; an extremity of excitement washed over me. The next recall was another portrayal of foppery and frippery, Prince Etienne in my secondary school. This time evil. Bows and pantomime boos. The costume

was a lovely blue, hat feathered, bordered with the lace, the sword – in style cavalier. The drama was on a big school stage the size of many a repertory theatre. The post - performance entrance to the dining hall and mob of girls of extreme proportions in a child's eye. Then finally the performance of a less than foppish elderly gent. Still on school premises, but quite adult by then, and before an audience that paid. Decked in Stratford theatre costumes and wig of distinction and weight – the nerves taut – to exhaustion. And then a psychologically revelatory conclusion as I mounted the school bus and grinned ear to ear at the driver who reflected on the ghastly pallor of my skin.

“You forgot to take your make-up off, love.”

But the pallor had another explanation, and I promptly entertained my audience with being sick.

It was a bulimia of sorts. Gorged on the grandness of it all; checked with nerves. And the nerves were devastating, fuelled by a system that felt too much (so said a flip analyst of my acquaintance) – a raw commodity of un-insulated emotion.

Stronger feelings than either of my titan forbears were burdened

with. Was it this that pigmatised me by the side of their endeavours?

My parents had led thematic lives that had them kept them in lifelong energised thrall, an optimistic bubble, the push to new notions, class recast. It was a heady brew. Their personal odyssey was post war rebirth, not introspection.

Casting an eye back, symptoms of withdrawal were mine. Set back from the juggernaut of aspiration and distorted by the rushes of a raw nervous system.

I did less than they, but perhaps knew more; - put up a membrane of escape and protection in which cocoon I could think.

The cocoon of thought and awe

Separation of me from myself in mirrors, lake, streams, in the perspectives of light on stone, the minutiae of lichen, moss, slime and the infinitesimal water - colours of old stone composition. I put my hand to sunk walls, remnants of fields' borders waving across

the landscape that had once hemmed in sheep, cattle. And my hands to the stones of churches, on a mission of solitude, the smell of water on wall, wet lime and light. A light that yellowed on the tracery of stone, recoding in shades the eye follows - perspectives that swallow me up and give depths to the shallows. A daily pilgrim, time and again I'd sit in the thrall of Canterbury Cathedral as it towered above. Small and self - denied as the arching pillars drew above my head. Or I'd skirt round its outward face – massive slab, stone tree like edifice against all weathers shooting its assertion at the sky.

Living trees were my other sanctuary of perspective, dwarfing self with their reach and travail against the pedestrian pull of earth's wiring. Their upward reach and sculptured couching of beyond, a filigreed sky and hinterland. Shaping the horizon, they drew poetry.

There was poetry, plays written in the retreat of cafes, cushioned in their anonymity – distanced by the surrounds and business of strangers.

Early evening, humans haunting the precincts of trains were streaming across the Thames bridge to my rear. Cushioned in an

expansive soft plastic seat – to my fore stretches a café of municipal arts proportions, generous, uncompetitive, proper refectory hot foods, the woods and lights of 1950s avant – garde; the Royal Festival Hall as it was in the 1970s. No music or din cut the air; there was a gentle meeting of souls hush. A habitué, I sat with some thoughts and scribbles over a cup of tea, my eye caught by a couple of painted ladies – drinkers, smokers. I surmised they were women of letters; aged, intense, grimaced in discussion. They reminded me of the French bohemian writer Collette. The distance of watching them – cameo creation – produced a wry inner smile, touch of joy, consciously imprinting them on my mind to last, at least for a while.

Café crystallisation of feeling and times, self contained, distanced encapsulation. As a child cushioned with mother, I had dined regularly in the bosom of the country town of Hereford in a black and white Tudor café of decent proportions and comfort with old wood tables and carpet pile that had seen better times. Then there was the teenaged smoke steeped Crumpled Horn café in a Monmouth, Welsh border townlet, back street – illicit thoughts, the edge of fear across formica tops sporting cups of coffee froth. But more so in solitude in the bedraggled old British Railways station

cafes – Hereford, Cheltenham, Canterbury – a little light in fog, outside trains and grime and the dark cold of winter afternoons.

Elizabeth Jennings, a poet who was meted out in school in a slim volume of modern poets, had an introversion par excellence.

Middle-aged, dishevelled and an intellectual melancholy that beguiled, she sat and wrote her great poems in café solitude - everyday. She gave me a legitimation of a way of being and writing.

The café in the seat of the cathedral at Canterbury. Craggy, rough ready, old beamed with a live fire. Every afternoon I holed up there with tea, scones and flames, and wrote plays, with the low sound of others corralled and unobtrusive.

Suspended, I was apart from both the direct rub of people and the gnawing rumination of total aloneness. Writing itself was always done in an illegible way to lessen the moment of the act. Outside there was the stone hugeness of the temple, while inside a sense of being some way into the flames. All gave a freedom that drummed thought out onto a scrap of paper.

There were whole days crafted with tending this sensibility, each worth the exchange of a hundred mundane unsung days, days spent with the cathedrals of Ely, Salisbury, Norwich, Lincoln, York. The bigger elemental rock-stone creations fostering the lesser in me - a human scratch on paper. Symbolism of earth – to - earth, ashes to ashes, touched an inner tic; there was immersion in stone, homage to the larger mass. Burrowing with the drops distilled from cathedrals' walls to write in their shadows, in the café crypts, small in their skirts, half turned to the light and ordinariness of faces, but not quite turning until the writing done. Then the journey home – and reflected in the train's glass window another self in the stretches of England beyond – fields, woods and hills – and little lights; shutting out behind my hair, even using cupped hands to protect the eyes from strident reflections, sights of passengers and train light. The grind and motion of the train infected my body, out of skin thought tumbled and I could almost see an alter ego in the fields beyond.

Trains, ships and dissolution

Trains, sleeper trains, were cultivated too. Pilgrimages to Edinburgh over several decades. There was a trek sleeper to sleeper round Scandinavia, but that was different from the sculpting of a sensation that the solitary trips to Edinburgh were ; a suspension of the body and nerves. Mounting the wagon late, too late, out of London – shut the door and joyfully sip the cabin, the white sheets, the berth light, the little of everything – mine for the night. Wrapped ego – the pleasure of encasement from the world and the berth light is switched off. The creaks and whines – bone grinding sensation of the under carriage of the train as it shudders out of Euston to the North – and the dissolution of an anxious self – at one with the rhythm and dissonance – rocking and extraneous sounds.

It is a rude awakening as one exits from that suspense to the shock of a still and encumbered self. Compensated at least in measure by the grey stone city, the castle and rock and classic squares – a foreign land.

A hark back to childhood and the massive sturdy Swedish sleepers that cocooned on journeys north south, south north through a forbidding snow bound land – warmth in, cold out – both a vulnerability and security in the belly of this creature as it sneaked its way through wastes of firs and waters under cover of darkness. Greeted, farewelled by miniscule furred figures hidden in their coats. To my brother, to Stockholm, to others far up the map. It was partly in remembrance of this – but something more of self created solitude, calculated feeling – that I would take the sleeper to Edinburgh.

For trains swap ships; the cocoon of the hold, the cabin, the berth suspended between the attachment chains of two lands. To the motions and sounds of the train was added the swell of the sea – that rocked the stomach and tranquilised the head. It profoundly swaddled and extricated nerves. The mix of childhood sea and solitude was a magnet of colossal proportions – a gravitational pull that displaced much else; memory diminished in its wake. From the age of eight when my parents divorced I crossed the North Sea on my own.

I was put on board and left to my own devices at that extraordinarily tender age. The voyage lasted two nights and a day. Unleashed with a stack of naughty investigative proclivities, I was everywhere. Down to the third class, the steerage where I rioted. Up to the first class drawing room, full of 1930s English country house fittings, piano, desks, sofas, floral upholstery – slightly awed, my racketing was moderated to quieter tones in these domains.

Because of a late booking I had to go first class on this first occasion to see my divorced father. I sat dwarfed at a large round, white linen clothed, silver serviced table with adults of cut glass tones. The food had none of 1950s English bland quality; it was Swedish smorgasbord, fish and meats of all varieties, and, like a country house weekend, meals were included in the voyage price – no filthy lucre passed hands.

“Look at that little one – I mean she can hardly eat a fraction of what is put before her. Wasted, so much of it is wasted!” So regaled a frighteningly clipped toned woman of poise; a business woman I guessed, who would no doubt one day put the world to rights with tills and cash extraction. She was speaking to the man

paying her attention at the table we were allotted for the voyage. But those adults couldn't detract from my pleasure. Around the table were our very own cloth napkins laid out in named folders. Truly grand, I was agog.

Indeed much food was wasted, but I was less of a culprit than other passengers falling prey to sea sickness – in this old ship; stabilisers were for the future like cash tills. By tea on the middle day few could make it up the grand, regal stairs to sit in state with their wiener bread and cream cakes. But I, undaunted and unsickened ran up the stairs. Swell permitting, for as the ship plunged down all the weight of the heavens came down on your head. I learnt to wait for the upturn as the ship rose – and flew with it, elated in mind and body.

The extremes, rubs, elations and savagings of human contact were jammed into these annual shippings across the North Sea. How like the insights from tales of life aboard for sailors on long voyages, cheek by jowl for periods of heightened, concentrated existence; these memories had the superficiality of a couple of days, but the vividness of encapsulated time had stuck their

picture on the retina, edging out other claims in the jostle for space.

“To my smiling little friend.”

I sat, glowed, some ten years old as the gentleman at the adjoining table presented me with a pencilled portrait of me; I was thrilled to the core of my ego – utterly joyed, clasped it to me and ran down with it to the recesses of my cabin.

But could not resist – nor why should I? – to show the picture to a boy / girl duo with whom I had struck up a companionship within the public spaces of the ship.

The boast backfired. They snatched the picture and ran through the bowels, corridors, sitting rooms of the ship. I chased. They tore it and threw the pieces in my face.

Other missiles flew; two iniquitous children onto one, until finally the disturbance moved the adults to anger and protest. The fight was stopped, but the hate stayed, a drop of which has been refined pearl like through years of retrospection.

I went back to my gentleman. I suppose he must have been youngish, thirties. I could perceive good - looking, large hair shock, formally dressed, tall, authoritative. I went back to claim the place in his attention to which I had been admitted.

But not so entitled – a look of slight irritation passed over his eyes at the request to draw again – to replace the portrait. His attention as we dined was elsewhere, with a lady as elegant as he, dark haired, olive skinned, turquoise suited, high heels , swan like, elongated neck and legs; she had of course been there when he drew the picture – presented it. I understood then that it was part of the courtship ritual, - and not a courtship of me; I had partaken of a love triangle and mine was the bitter cup.

The ship condensed living. There was the Christmas when I was entering my teens and warned of the danger of drunken amorous Danes, I cowered in my cabin for fear of rape. No ventures on that occasion then, but later they materialised well enough. At sixteen plus, I was encountered by a Swedish architect in a fashionable mustard brown cord suit, who sized me up and made an approach.

It worked well enough, we ate and talked the night through, but ever protective of maidenhead, he was denied at last.

Loves at home became associated with a particular passage; extant and passant, they were contemplated and mourned. Lives followed by deaths more so; heavily grieved on these days afloat. The voyages grew apace during my father's last year; planes resorted to only in the final extremity.

It was a dying of big pain and miserable drama, stretching from a terrifying summer into winter, a body falling apart with the cause kept hidden. A father deranged with his military sword in his hand and a pistol in the house; followed by a period of suspended life when I lodged with my aunt and took the train daily from Malmo to Lund and a mausoleum of a hospital that stretched out his dying – so long that Swedish became the dominant language in my mind. And then the death that severed the past from the present. The Swedish story now became a history from which the last dwindling juices were extracted over a lifetime.

There was the post funeral expedition, loaded with the family silver, valuables, and valuables of another sort – my mother's

letters to him from over the course of a separating and separated marriage. It was another take on their life and mine that held me bound with reading from the cast off at Esbjerg to the arrival at Harwich; grey ports both. I hardly left the sofa throughout the crossing – slants, half - truths, vividness of style and illicit insights came from the page and kept me hooked. Till drunk with it, I left the boat with my booty – mind and suitcase heavy. The boat was a place of condensed dying.

Drama the more intense for the encasing solitude of these lonely travels – I projected changes in life onto these interludes on the sea – clocked an emerging physiognomy through girlhood, womanhood and in between. Alone amongst strangers in the ship's lounges, I would sit with my book and persona - passing glances at the self portrait in the big black, un-curtained windows reflecting back once night fell on the waves outside.

Sometimes I would sit by the windows at night and look beyond the face and eyes that stared back to the occasional white froth that rode the crest of a wave and countermanded the black; sometimes I could even see the black on black shade of the

differentiation between sea and sky. The whole of these journeys were a heady mix between self and dissolution.

Nowhere more so than in the cabin at night – sometimes shared; but when in bunk, curtain drawn, alone with motion – there would be a suspended night where I would search for wakefulness as much as sleep to lengthen the feel, the thinking in the cradle of the rocking, holding it in the still of a photograph on the mind.

The dark wood of those old ships clad the cabin and entombed; the heavy porcelain basin, glass decanter of water, nettings, hefty curtains, brass window bolts and taps; there was a solidity and fitting of everything in this small world that creaked with the ship as it groaned in its various parts and heaved through the bash of seas. Seas that you could witness at extraordinary proximity from the pillow as they slapped at the porthole.

All of this was in the parenthesis of a greeting at either end by engulfing, normalising adult love.

My father at the quay, the cares of autonomy lifted from my shoulders - cuddled, dined and latterly wined. When coming over

via Denmark we would have the grandeur of the ferry dining room crossing the Oresund straits , Copenhagen to Malmo, in the grandest of the old ferry's that indulged seafarers. Metaphorically I threw my suitcase at him, and in reality he took it, which was a huge relief because it was extraordinarily heavy for a little girl.

And on the return my mother would retrieve me. On that first trip it was with a desperation that found its expression in a hammed up drama worthy of her East of London roots.

In those days of wariness, early post war, passport control took place, not on the quay, but on the boat as it made its way along the coastal flats towards Tilbury. A tug would scurry out to the hulk of a ship with officialdom, customs officers, who would climb aboard, sit in the grand surrounds of the first class sitting room and examine the passengers, their persons and credentials. There was a frisson of excitement. But on this occasion there was another amongst the party; my mother had charmed her way into joining the officers on the tug, the quicker to see me. Out it boomed on the ship's speaker as I sat at breakfast. Summoned to the captain's room. It was a strange intrusion of cuddles and loud extravagant endearments – out of place – or in place in her drama and

affection; funny now, but cringe-making for a child elevated to solo seafarer, though even then I remember some basking in the swaddling of sentiment.

That was in the early days, latterly there was no one to greet at the port and I had to take trains.

Meeting my split parents was now at their homes or train stations, instead of quays and harbours. Until they too dropped off through dying. But I still went across the North Sea, even though my father was dead (he died before her). There were one or two connections, Mats and his family, my cousin, aunt and the country itself. But the sea voyage became the cherished point of preservation, for itself alone. Often disproportionate time-wise to the length of stay, when a rational soul would fly, I would contrive repeats of times past and take the ship; hauled by the umbilical cord back to the sack of the womb.

There was a journey when I was in the throws of placing my aging aunt, whose legs buckled under her never to work again, in a home for the elderly infirm. A Swedish home of light walls, light wood floor, furniture, tapestries, candles – the instruments of

hospitalisation well camouflaged. Though more in evidence on a second visit, a longer acquaintance.

It was the return, when a cousin and I had finally got her, post several suicide attempts, lonely and uncared for in her own home, into this sought after residence. Flat cleared, her new single room installed with such pictures, furniture, ornaments as would fit, we were fagged out with the physicality of the humping and the dust – and nerves taut to breaking caring for an elder who was shit scared; there were emergencies with the commode.

I had booked the ship from Esbjerg – rush and selflessness jettisoned. To another's eye it would have been a laborious detour, but to me pleasure. The ferry – albeit not leisurely dining but a fast craft – to Copenhagen, then train across the islands of Denmark to the port, or so I thought. But the train stopped at the town station; stranded, no longer a boat train, a taxi the only option for that out dated phenomena, the foot passenger. There was a melancholic wait, almost alone, solitary as I sat in the passenger hall that had changed little since my memory of a first Christmas coming via this route decades back. A light sandstone brick – Scandia taste here too, the clock with minimalist markings that were avant-guard then.

There in the forecourt by the marbled stair sweep, the band of Dansk red and white military clad band had played Christmas tunes in the grey nocturnal day as we passengers alighted, lugged cases, greeted and felt uplifted at Jul. My father had been amongst the greeters – hatted, coated, scarfed, while I cut a waif like figure, inadequately dressed with knee high socks instead of leggings in the Scandinavian freeze. Warmly embraced by him, I was taken in hand and reclad.

The thin smile of recollection sat with me as I drank black coffee, ate cinnamon bun and waited for the doors to be opened to boarding the gangplank.

One of the few to walk onto the boat. Familiar, if more plastic than the older boat – but with my many trips, I had made the transition years ago when the floating mansion had been scrapped amidst tears. The first class sitting room gone, now a corridor lounge ran along the high glass walls of the ship fronting the sea.

Out on the deck the funnel no longer the tall functional tube, but a piece of squat veneer masking some vents. Though the same siren roared as the ship slipped its moorings, and I saw, as I

always had, the shore dwindle to a modest film of grey land on a lighter grey sea to become one with the horizon and vanish.

I turned in to the cabin, alone and closeted in a miniscule world – the cloak of it, the rumble and grind of it – the sheets crisped to receive a body savouring the minutiae of dips and heaves. The ship had a stabiliser these days, but I could feel the rocking cradle still. And the waves picked up to a fair pitch. I slowly readied for dinner.

I had a reservation in the swathe of dining room across the back of the ship. As near to the sea as maybe; almost a conservatory – falling off into the sea with vast windows and it was by one of these that I secured a place; big panes from floor to ceiling, whose transparency onto the night rendered them black, with white lace curtained protection for the diners, – curtains which I drew back at the table for two where I sat solo. It was a sparse passenger cargo which left the dining room half empty – an eeriness that supported introspection.

The tables and waiters were white lined as ever they were - and the smorgasbord as ever it was – a bottle of wine for one – and a

night without the cloud of familial relationships – or any relationship – no chatter beyond my own. A possibly maudlin tinged reflection on voyages past - their fit in the scheme of some fifty years of lived time. Face in the window – a reiteration of the delve into the eye lens, - and beyond to the variegation, multiple shadings of the blacks in the big sky, but more so in the water. The incessant motion, shift, rills of foam – but more than black on black, - purple and other colours.

I reflected on my quite savage anxieties and their life long duel with an ego pulled to the centre stage; so much energy combusted in the conflict. How unlike my parents who did things with an unblinker forward vision. Perhaps I was the afterbirth of a neurosis that had been kept well out of sight in an era when needs must and delivery was all. Or maybe it was simply a recessive gene. But whatever the cause, there was one aspect of the muddled mongrel product self that I cradled, beatified and that was the capacity for introspection, un-layering of thought. I indulged in front of this ship's window. A melancholic introspection took hold in the glass and water beyond reflecting on the retina and mind; I found it pleasant, poignant to the gut core, utterly at home in a minor key.

Contentment with the food and wine, more so with being at sea – with having been at sea over years; the state of suspension, the rock and ease on my stomach, anxiety assuaged, a portfolio of thoughts. There was the plasticity of a face changed over years, but I was happily chained to child, babyish first memories here. It was what I wanted. It was the best of it. And it was where I wanted to exit. I determined then that when the time came of infirmity or depression, I would take a ship, anaesthetise myself with drink, and leave through the North Sea.