

A Tug on the Thread

From the British Raj to the British Stage

A Family Memoir

Diana Quick

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Extract

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Preface

If you dig deep enough, all our secrets are the same . . . deep down below there is the hard rock of the common denominator, the sameness of our secrets.

Amos Oz on BBC's *Start the Week*, 25 February 2001

It all started when I was playing a fugitive from the Third Reich in *Kindertransport* by Diane Samuels. Eva had left her family behind in Nazi Germany to make her way by train – the Kindertransport – to a new life in Britain. When, against all the odds, her mother survives the extermination camps and turns up in England to reclaim her daughter, Eva cannot respond with love. I am not your daughter any more, she says, you sent me away. Don't you understand I would rather have taken my chance with you in the camps than survived alone without you?

We see a woman who, up to now, has seemed very controlled, even dispassionate, crack up to reveal the hurt child inside. Eva has had to grow up far away from her parents, she has made a life for herself and is to all intents a middle-class, middle-aged English woman. The crisis of the play unfolds as we discover that this is far from a successful transformation, for it was made by denying her true identity. She rejects her mother because the cost of re-opening

those old wounds is too high, but in refusing this opportunity she ruins any chance that she has of healing herself.

As far as I know I am not Jewish, but when I was asked how I went about playing Eva it set me thinking. As an actor you fish into any memories, stories, observations you may have collected on your way through life and, if they chime with the situation you are required to act out, you use them. Of course imagination plays a large part, too, but it always starts with something you feel you know about. For *Kindertransport* I had thought about my own father a great deal. He had been raised in India, and was sent away to a school in the Himalayas aged five. He came to England at seventeen to go to dental school and never went back, barely had any connection to his family again. As I worked on Eva I thought about the emotional cost of leaving your family behind; of how my father was very controlled but loving, and yet – like Eva – he could also be curiously unapproachable and unknowable.

The play was very successful. We were in the West End for a six-month run and there wasn't a night when people were not waiting at the stage door to talk about it and, above all, about their own experiences. The play had acted as a trigger, and for many – many! – it was the first time they had been able to look at complicated, painful, ambiguous feelings. There were so many who wanted to thank us for opening these particular doors. I have always thought that the theatre is a place to open people up. It's a place to entertain, of course, a place to divert ourselves, but it has another function, as a forum for ideas and as a mirror to nature, in which we can sometimes see ourselves and our fellows reflected, amplified and made clearer.

I think this happened because of our timing with *Kindertransport*, playing it as we did some fifty years after the end of the war, as the generation who had survived were reaching an age at which they

realised that if they did not pass on their experiences to their children now it would soon be too late to tell them. It was also a time at which the widespread wish to belong to English society, to fit in, was starting to give way to a desire to celebrate where people had come from, to uncover ancestors, to trace roots. We caught hold of the *Zeitgeist* with this play, and it gave me one of my most exciting and humbling experiences of my career.

In thinking about how, as an actor, one uses one's emotional life to furnish a character, I started to want to explore further, first my father's life and then how I had developed the emotional dimensions of characters I had played. Was there a common theme to them? And if I had been influenced by things in the family cupboard, did that determine how I was myself, when not acting?

In order to address these questions, I was going to have to look at my history in a new way. Growing up in the sixties I had always taken pride in being able to go with the flow, but now I wanted to look at some of the roles I have acted, to see how they have informed who I am, and how I have drawn on my own character to create others further on in my career. I knew I would have to start by looking at what had happened in my father's family, for there had always been a degree of silence about his life before he arrived in England, and I had a hunch that if I could unlock that, then I might be able to understand better.

I knew very little about my father's childhood, since he had died when I was a teenager. But I had always intended to find out more and I now embarked on an enquiry that has taken nine years, thousands of miles and a hard look not only at Eva but at why in my career as an actor I have played so many outsiders, exotics and people in denial of their true selves.

It started at school; Rosa the gypsy girl was created especially for me by – me! Aged thirteen, my class wrote and performed an

operetta in which Rosa is carried off by the wicked Sir Jasper to live happily ever after. I found a fantastic Hungarian peasant costume at my grandfather's house (I still don't know to this day how he had acquired it), with a bodice embroidered in scarlet, bright blue and cerise, and a panelled velvet skirt. That was it: I was lost to show business. I knew I was nothing like a real gypsy, of course: I had met one when off at a Girl Guide camp. It had been my job that day to collect wood for the campfire. I'd never had to do that before, and so gingerly set off into the undergrowth. Suddenly there was a slim, brown, crop-haired girl. It was as if she'd appeared from nowhere. Joan was a traveller; her family's van was camped a short distance away on the edge of the wood. She and I got talking and she offered to help me collect the wood. In no time at all she had got a massive stack together and I started to see with her eyes, to spot where the wood was and to make my own pathetic pile into a decent-sized bundle. We took it all back to the camp and, my chore accomplished, I happily followed her to another part of the wood where she showed me a rope tied high in a tree growing by the water's edge, which you could run with and jump on to swing far out over the water before splashing down. It was heaven. I knew I'd never be her or have her familiarity with the woods, but I wanted to be like her, and there was a sort of osmosis by which I could mimic her and her ease in the countryside, her smooth passage amongst the trees, her delight in moving through the water. I daresay wanting to play Rosa the gypsy was in some way a tribute to that brief encounter.

When I started to get professional work some seven years later, it was mainly to play peasants. I was cast as the token peasant in Sam Spiegel's last epic film, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, getting trampled to death at the Bloody Sunday demonstration, and as a Greek peasant girl in love with the Christ figure in Kazantzakis's *Christ Recrucified*. When I made it to the National Theatre it was to play an Indian princess in a version of Racine's *Phèdre* set in the British

Raj. In fact, I played so many exotic parts that I thought I would never be cast as anything else, and threatened to fire my agent and set up my own agency.

I did knock the exotics on the head for a while by refusing the relatively easy pickings that were coming my way, and sitting it out until I began to be cast in other parts. Over my career, however, I have played many such parts and feel very comfortable doing so. The question I found myself asking is, do I feel so comfortable as an outsider because of some unconscious aspect of my family history? To all intents and purposes I am an English woman. I am probably still best known as Lady Julia Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited*, yet if you look closely at Julia you soon see that she is an outsider too: some of her relatives are dark and foreign, her family is Roman Catholic and her father, brother and herself all flout the conventions of the social class to which they belong. So why, I wonder, have I been always drawn to play those who live outside the pale? Can it just be chance? Or is it that somewhere in my family is a history of denial that, unknowingly, I have drawn upon, and which, if uncovered, could perhaps explain my choices?

I

Two Unreal Things

There were two unreal things. The first bit was going over the handlebars of my bike and knocking myself out. I was cycling back to college from a lecture – unusual for me, since I had long been in the habit of skiving off lectures to make more time for rehearsals. I seem to recall that this lecture had been by Isaiah Berlin, and though not part of my English Literature course it was absolutely unmissable. I'd gone on my Pink Witch bike – also unusual, since more often than not I couldn't find it. I was a scatty girl, continually mislaying the bike around Oxford, but because it was so distinctive – neon pink with bits of bright metallic blue – it usually turned up again somewhere.

I was wearing a minidress so short that when I'd finished sewing it I realised I'd have to make knickers to match. Today, though, decency was preserved by a long scholar's gown that covered my legs. I was on the home stretch when the gown's dangling pointed sleeve somehow got entangled in the front wheel and I went clean over the handlebars. I was out cold for a moment or two, and when I came to it took a while for me to realise what had happened. I wasn't badly hurt, just a bit scraped and bruised, and more embarrassed than anything else.

I took off my mangled gown and started to make my way back to the red brick façade of Lady Margaret Hall. As I wheeled my bike along I consoled myself with the thought that I'd had more luck than my older brother, Clive: he spent a lot of his adolescence salvaging old bicycles from dumps and rebuilding them, and once, when he was testing a re-assembled beauty on the heathland in front of our house, the gears had jammed and he too had knocked himself out going over the handlebars. He'd lost his memory for several days, and couldn't even hang on to the name of his beloved cat, let alone those of his siblings. I was a lot younger than him and found the whole episode spooky. Five years on and I'd done the same thing. I now knew what seeing stars meant too, but at least I also knew who I was and what I was doing.

I was a month off my nineteenth birthday and in my second year as an undergraduate. It was 1965, and it felt as if the world really was my oyster. I took for granted that the young were the centre of the universe. My leaving home had coincided with the great flowering of youth culture of the sixties, and it was people my age or not much older who were making the music and the films and the plays and the art and the magazines that dominated the headlines.

I had no sense of history, of how radical a change this was from the cultural style of the previous decade. In fact I was a baby boomer, born as a result of my father's first leave after the war. My early childhood had been defined by talk of the war and what the family had had to do – digging for victory, going off to be land girls while the men were at war, avoiding doodlebugs, hiding in the air-raid shelter, evacuation. Some of the family didn't make it back from the war. My aunt's fiancé had been wiped out by a bomb just after he'd enlisted, before he saw any active service, while sitting outside his barracks at his basic training camp. At home there had been an attitude of 'make do and mend': clothes were handed down

or sometimes the seams unpicked and the fabric re-cut and re-sewn, jumpers unravelled and the wool knitted again, and paper and string and everything really saved for re-use. Old rubber gloves were cut up for rubber bands, and you always had to eat everything on your plate, with an exhortation to think of the poor little children starving in Africa.

I'd left home as soon as I could, and by seventeen was delighted to skip off to college. Looking back, it feels as if I was far too young to manage my life but I adored being in charge of myself and making my own choices, even if they turned out to be duds. I don't think I ever got into a proper routine of study, because the theatre had seduced me as soon as I got to Oxford. The lecture that day had been a sop to my academic conscience before I went off to spend the rest of the day in a rehearsal room as my alter ego, Victoria Groves. The false name was necessary because I had already used up my annual allowance of acting parts: my college rather grudgingly conceded that we might appear in one play a year in any year without exams, and since that meant only the summer of the first year, after prelims (the preliminary exams in Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Milton if, like me, you were reading English) and one some time in the next, I had adopted my middle names for the cast list in order to escape the notice of the college. This was my fifth play and it was only my fourth term.

I'd come to Oxford to study literature, and my college clearly had faith in me, but the theatre was my real passion. I had no thought for the future; all I wanted was to get to my rehearsal for *The Horse*, a Hungarian satire on life under a communist regime that the university's Experimental Theatre Club was staging in its English premiere. In 1965 Hungary was still regarded as an heroic victim of communist Russia after the suppression of the Uprising nine years earlier, but the playwright, Julius Hay, had obtained permission to come out of Hungary to attend our rehearsals; his son Peter was a

fellow undergraduate and had translated the work himself. The play was an allegory of life under a totalitarian government: Caligula appoints his horse consul, and even nightingales are forbidden to sing. I was to be Ameana, the horse's hapless bride. The national press was interested; I had a wonderful part; it all felt terribly important.

When I walked into college there were messages for me everywhere – in my pigeonhole, with the porter, pinned to my door: Contact your tutor IMMEDIATELY. This was Kathleen Lea who, as well as teaching me Elizabethan literature, was my moral tutor and my champion; it was she who had recommended me for the senior scholarship when I was only sixteen and appallingly ill-read, she was the one who fretted over whether I was eating enough and insisted that I attend meals in hall at least once a day (at the time I was a robust size 14 with a 38-inch bust). Lately she had been concerned that I was spending rather too much time with the muses Polyhymnia, Melpomene and Thalia (mimic art, tragedy and comedy), as she put it, to the detriment of Calliope and Erato (epic and lyric poetry). That was how she often spoke, and I had had to learn a whole new language and style in order to communicate with her. I liked and admired and respected her, hence the pseudonym: I wasn't going to stop being in plays but I didn't want to upset her. She had impeccable manners, a tiny frame, a face like a rosy wizened apple and a large decanter of sherry for occasions such as this. She made me sit down and told me that my father had died that morning of a heart attack.

When I got home the house was, as usual, full of family, but now doing their bustling in silence. Sisters and aunts filled me in with the details; where were the two boys, my brothers? I've very little memory of them in all this. I understood, vaguely, that the service

would be a full Catholic requiem. I wasn't sure if I'd ever been in a Catholic church – perhaps once or twice, for a wedding. I glanced at my mother's face and decided that it wasn't the moment to ask why we were having a mass. From the moment I'd gone over the handlebars the day had had an unreal spin to it: seeing stars; learning that my father was dead at the age of fifty when he had seemed to us all to be fit, athletic and full of energy; and now this absolutely unknown ritual we were going to go through, a full Requiem Mass for a man who had never once mentioned that he was a Roman Catholic.

At the morgue, he was behind glass. Now when I think of him, which I do often, I think of him being in a glass box like Snow White. His body looked calm, as if he were only sleeping. But the second unreal thing was the colour of my father's ears. I thought I might hear the inevitable snore in a minute, and would jiggle his foot to stop it as we'd always done, but no, the purplish-blackish-blue accumulation of blood in his ears gave the lie to that. No more jiggling his foot, no more cuddling up in an armchair or on the beach. This was it. It was over. He had gone away. I stood for a long time and stared. When I left I kept walking for twenty paces or so then found myself clinging to my sister and howling at the sky.

I don't remember much about the service. It was in the little local church. Later I was to learn that my parents had been married there, and during the mass I dimly recognised it as the place my sister had also been married, age twenty, to a Roman Catholic. Of the four children three of us were to choose partners who had been raised as Catholics, but of course that was not clear then. I didn't know the extent to which our father's upbringing would impinge on our choices in adult life.

At twelve I must have had an inkling that the family had started out differently. There was some talk about the older children going to

confession when I was too tiny even to be entrusted with collection money in the cool, light-filled, perfumed church near the house in which I first lived, but I didn't know if they had ever gone.

'Please Miss Abraham, I think I'm supposed to be a Catholic but I don't know where the church is . . .'

The monumental head of the junior school, with her iron-grey hair shorn up the back of her neck, her tremendous bosom straining against the buttons of her cardigan and against the hearty tweed of her skirt, dismissed my half-baked request peremptorily. 'Ask your parents,' she said, but I would not be asking questions. Not in our house, because they'd be brushed aside – not harshly or angrily, but carelessly like crumbs swept off the table.

I'd never got to the bottom of the facts of life, for instance. At school the others would ask in the playground, do you know the facts of life yet? Bet you don't know what a rubber johnny is. But at home when I'd asked about a pack of sanitary towels my brother Richard and I had found in a cupboard, I was dismissed with 'I'll tell you about it when the time comes.' What time, we wondered and wandered off to mine the treasures in other cupboards with pads dangling under our chins and looped over our ears. Nobody seemed to notice.

When the time did come, blood pouring between my legs and soaking my pants with a brownish-red metallic goo as I played hookey from Sunday school, I believed it was a sign that I was being punished for my waywardness, for stealing tins of condensed milk and spoonfuls of dried egg powder left over from the war from the larder, which were washed down with our special drink. You took all the Refreshers of one colour from two tubes of the little round sherbet sweets – blue or pink or yellow or green – and chewed them up, spat them into a beaker, mixed in some water and served as if it was a proper milkshake. All this was done while perched in the branches of the treetop highway, a circle of tall elms where you

could climb from one tree to the next without ever having to come down to the ground. It was much more fun than the mile walk across the heath (children could roam freely in the fifties) to the white-boarded St Barnabas's, the Anglican church where my sister rang the bells every Sunday.

At the weekend our parents were mostly out having fun; golf or tennis or motor-racing, or dancing with friends. So when I ran out of tissues to staunch the flow of blood I reluctantly hobbled home and was dealt with firmly but silently by my grandmother, who kitted me out with a sanitary belt of Germolene-pink elastic and one of the bulky pads that had previously dangled from my ears, and tucked me up in bed with a hot-water bottle and a bowl of bread and milk (a panacea in our house), saying by way of explanation only 'This will happen every month, now you are a woman.' I was eleven. When my parents came home they too treated me like an invalid. Was this what all the fuss was about, then, three years earlier when my sister had danced around chanting 'I know something you don't know.' 'What?' 'You'll know when you're eleven.' So now I knew. And I stopped going to Sunday school.

I don't remember much about the funeral or its aftermath. I spent a few days at home with my mother, who was silent and stunned by grief. A week later I was back at university. No time for lectures now; the play was to open in less than a week. There was a lot to catch up on. Our playwright Julius Hay gave an interview in which he said, 'A nation who can laugh at their tyrant is on the way to freedom. Laugh, dear people, laugh with us.'

No time to mourn – I was a week behind. I still had to catch up with the academic work and for the play there were still lines to learn and costumes to make, as well as technical and dress rehearsals. Many years later, after my mother had died, I found

some of my letters home among her papers. I wrote this in the week I got back to college after the funeral:

8-11-65

Darling Mummy,

I wrote to say hello and how are you? We've been rehearsing like MAD since Friday afternoon and now don't know whether I'm coming or going.

They've built our set – it is sort of ruined Roman, but giving a tremendous impression of light. There are some lovely columns and a huge staircase – they need it with such a large cast – about fifty, I think.

Everybody has been so nice – my tutors, and everyone in college, and everyone connected with the play.

I suppose it is a good thing I've got so much to keep me occupied. I have lovely costumes too – yellow and white, and russet and gold, and my hair in a very elaborate style.

Can you let me know exactly how many tickets are wanted when? I can't remember anything.

We think about you and dear Daddy a lot. Please give my love to everyone, but most of all to you.

So I spent the two weeks up to my nineteenth birthday trying to make people laugh. The reviews were kind to me, less so for the play. But to be in the play and be praised for it distracted me from my grief. It was a definite consolation. I was already a veteran of student drama as, since my debut in the primary school's Nativity aged six, playing a shepherdess, I had performed in about twelve plays. I was the Princess in *The Princess and the Swineherd* and Rosa the gypsy. I'd been Captain Bluntschli in Shaw's *Arms and the Man* and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. (I was tall for my age and always ended up as the boy.) At the local amateur theatre, where

my father was stage manager and my mother helped out with the costumes and the coffee, I'd been Juliet, and Beauty in *Beauty and the Beast*, Katharine in *Henry V* and Fay in *The Boy Friend*. Between school and going up to university I'd been Hermia for the National Youth Theatre at the Queen's Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, and because that made them trust that I might be able to act I was cast as Abigail Williams in *The Crucible* in my first term at Oxford when someone more senior had fallen ill. I'd played one of the leads in a musical called *You Can't Do Much Without a Screwdriver* and been the girl in the Oxford revue at the Edinburgh Festival with Michael Palin, turning down Cressida at the National Youth Theatre to do it. I wasn't really much cop as a singer, but then I'd been approached by two young men called Lloyd-Webber and Rice to sing Mary Magdalene in a musical they were writing about Jesus. I'd refused, not trusting my singing to be good enough.

I'd written, directed, designed costumes, done publicity and been both stage manager and production manager. Yet if anyone asked me what my plans for after my degree were, I was cagey. Not out of prudence, particularly, nor lack of confidence, I was simply living in the moment. I couldn't think about the future because the present was so interesting, and time stretched ahead infinitely.

Now, with my nineteenth birthday, I had to catch up. The play was finished and all the academic work that had been on hold for three weeks had to be done. I'd be sitting quietly reading or writing, and would find that a sob would rise up from the well of my belly and burst out of me. More would follow in a great uncontrollable wave. It was almost as if it was happening to somebody else, and even as my body shuddered and howled the actress in me was observing from one side – so this is what a person does in deep grief. And then, as suddenly as it had started, it would be over.

My father's death was the first thing that had ever gone wrong

for me. Throughout my teens I was clear, undistracted, fully engaged in whatever I was doing and confident that if I wanted to do something I could get it with concentration and hard work. Nothing had ever happened to prove me wrong. And I was very blinkered: I had no critical perspective whatsoever.

I was amazed, for instance, when Polly Toynbee, whom I'd known and admired at the National Youth Theatre and as a regular player in our Sunday morning football team (girls only allowed to be strikers) left Oxford in the middle of her course, hugely dissatisfied. I couldn't imagine that anyone could be having less fun than I was. Or that they wanted anything other than fun. There were some brilliant and beautiful people among my contemporaries: Emma Rothschild had come up on a scholarship in PPE* at fifteen and Marina Warner, who later became a novelist and cultural historian, was in my year at Lady Margaret Hall, exquisite and cultured, and the belle of every social event. Tariq Ali and William Waldegrave were making political waves on opposing sides at the Union and Sarah Boyd-Carpenter (now Baroness Hogg) dwelt in the sophisticated realms of journalism and Westminster. Somewhere in the University Christopher Hampton was writing a play that would be snapped up by the Royal Court Theatre while he was still a student, and would launch him into his professional career as a playwright. Long before he was to become notorious as a marijuana dealer, Howard Marks held sway in the druggy court from which several of my friends were exiled and then sent down when Joshua Macmillan, grandson of the former prime minister, was found dead in his bed. I'd never got into the habit of watching television, and I was more or less blind to film – even when the tyro film director John Birt, later to be chair of the BBC, held auditions for a film he was making and asked if I'd be willing to strip off . . .

* Philosophy, Politics and Economics

The world beyond the university barely impinged at all. I loved rock'n'roll but really only heard bands if they had been hired to play at some ball where I happened to be doing cabaret. I did manage to see some great ones that way, and I remember the Rolling Stones being really pissed off at having to turn up to play a commemoration ball in the middle of their first American tour. I'd known some of the band before they were famous, because they came from the same town as me, and I had to laugh when they were dragged back from America because I'd last seen Mick in the Carousel Coffee Bar on West Hill, Dartford, one Saturday morning two years earlier. He'd been agonising over whether to go on the road with the band, who'd just got their first serious gig, or stay on at the London School of Economics and complete his degree. They were going to replace him as lead singer if he didn't go.

I never read a paper, didn't own a radio. I remember hearing with some amazement that Winston Churchill had died, some two years after it had happened. I didn't actually live in an ivory tower – my college was solid red brick and, some claimed, the inspiration for Toad Hall in *The Wind in the Willows* – but I was as cut off from the outside world as if I did. But now, with my father's death, I was forced to take notice of that world.

When term ended I went home for a few days, and then returned to Oxford: the American Rhodes scholar who had played Caligula was getting married. I enjoyed the distraction of it, and I drank a lot of champagne and got sleepier and sleepier. In the car on the way back I could hardly keep my eyes open and by the time we'd gone the sixty-odd miles home it was difficult to rouse me. The doctor came round, a family friend, and I can remember snatches of conversation in which he speculated about meningitis or polio. It was hard for my mother; it was only a few weeks since she had buried her husband and now here was another crisis. In fact, all of us children were to react to our father's death in quite extreme ways. My

sister miscarried her first, much longed-for, child; my little brother, the only one still at home, was to muck up his A levels and take a year or two to sort himself out; and my other brother's private life reached a crisis. It was as if our family life had prepared none of us for any sort of crisis. Looking back, it feels as if we had enjoyed a sort of idyll through our childhood, untouched by the usual privations and losses that come to families. No deaths of close relations, no serious illness, enough creature comforts to be comfortable but not enough to make for a sense of being set apart by privilege.

I was sent off to an isolation ward in what had formerly been a plague hospital out on the Thames marshes and by the time I was admitted I was in a coma. No one had noticed at home, but in the hospital they thought me very dark – later my nurse said they had thought I was Indian. It was jaundice: I turned bright yellow. When I woke up ten days later my eyeballs were like orange conkers, I could barely see and my arms and legs were paralysed. It was quite bad as the bile had set up secondary irritations in the glands of my armpits and groin, and at the back of my eyes. I felt hopelessly weak and disoriented and could do nothing but try to stay on the bed – I kept finding myself in a heap on the floor – and think.

My father's requiem kept coming back to me. Why had he had a full-blown Catholic service? I'd thought I was very close to him, but I'd had no idea about his faith. When I really thought about his background I realised that all I knew for sure was that he had been born and raised in India, and had come to England to be a student at Guy's Hospital a few years before the Second World War. What world had he come from, then?

It was the world of Mowgli and Kim, as far as I was concerned. I'd read *The Jungle Book* and the *Just So Stories* when I was small, and any thoughts I had of India were mixed up with that early reading. I remembered my father speaking with a deep passion of the

Himalayas, which he would sometimes pronounce ‘Himaaaliyas’ with a big grin on his face. I didn’t really know where he’d been born or anything much about his circumstances. His father had been a doctor and dentist in Rawalpindi, and he had gone to school somewhere in the foothills of those same Himalayas. There was an icy lake fed by the surrounding snowy peaks in which the school swam before breakfast; there was a school dog that had once terrified him as a boy. He and a friend were hurrying back to school to meet the curfew after taking too long on a walk when they heard something padding through the jungle behind them. When they eventually plucked up courage to look they saw not a bear or some other great beast but the school dog, its guts and eyes falling out where it had been savaged by a black panther. I’d particularly loved this story, dwelling as it did on the precise nature of the dog’s injuries. And didn’t a black panther seem altogether slinkier and more exotic than a common-or-garden spotted one? I used to terrify myself at bedtime with the idea that the sand pits next door to our garden were inhabited by wolves and alligators, and every night they would start an inexorable climb up the steep sides of the pits towards the big curved white balcony that surrounded my bedroom. They were going to climb the fig tree and break through the balcony door to get me. There was a delicious frisson of terror every night as I lay in bed imagining their progress up and across the vegetable garden, past the pigsties and chicken runs and fruit trees, circling the billiard room, through the low white curving walls that separated the grass from the gravelled drive, eyeing the trellis next to the fig tree. Luckily the climb was difficult and slow, and dawn would always arrive before they could make their final assault, or, more likely, my eyes would close in sleep. My father’s story of the black panther, however, could always knock my night-time creatures into a cocked hat.

Some mornings he couldn’t go to breakfast because a bear would

be snoozing on the verandah of his dorm. I'd always longed for a dorm, any dorm – an Enid Blyton Malory Towers brick turret would have done, let alone a veranda'd bungalow surrounded by jungle. The North-West Frontier. That meant boys' stuff, I'd thought. I only really liked the Kim part of it, a small boy adrift in a multitude of exotic peoples. There were Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs and Pathans. Sometimes my father would be persuaded into a few words of Punjabi or Urdu or Pushtu. "*Sterai ma shay*," say the Pathans,' he'd say. 'May you never be defeated. May you never die.'

His death was an altogether sobering experience. And now, acutely ill myself for the first time, I had momentarily surfaced from my coma to hear a doctor's voice saying 'You must prepare yourself, Mrs Quick: she may not survive the night.'

'Dear God, no – oh no,' my poor mother, not two months widowed, groaned. I had no feelings other than surprise at the unexpectedness of it. To stop at nineteen. *Sterai ma shay*. I sank back into the black hole of the coma for another few days.

When I returned to college a term later, it was to a long, slow convalescence. I could no longer count on a limitless reserve of energy to get me through. No more partying and acting in several plays at once, no more writing through the night to get an essay done in time for a tutorial. That life had become a physical impossibility, and I felt distanced from almost every aspect of it. I didn't even recognise my reflection. I was also three stone lighter and that was the best thing to come out of the whole experience. I remember going into a department store and trying on hats. As I checked myself out in the mirror I suddenly realised that my cheeks were hollow below what looked like . . . cheekbones! Always before I would suck in my cheeks to get rid of my face's schoolgirl plumpness. This time when I sucked in my cheeks in a reflex action to look at myself in the white leather pill-box there was no change

in the shape of my face. (What I really wanted was a leopard-skin pill-box hat like the Dylan song, but Oxford stores and my limited budget wouldn't stretch to that. I settled for the white leather version.)

I was thin. Suddenly I had the trendiest figure imaginable: from being generously endowed I had become a waif. I looked good in the new tiny Biba dresses, which even I could afford because they were so unbelievably cheap. Until then I had made most of my own clothes because my mother had insisted that there wasn't enough money to buy me all the things I coveted. Through childhood I wore my three-years-senior sister's cast offs much of the time, and was beside myself with envy when she got a clothing allowance at fifteen, which she seemed to spend on little clutch bags and net petticoats. I never did get a clothing allowance myself, but my mother was a decent seamstress and she had taught me to make clothes, so I'd arrived in Oxford with an array of home-made frocks, most of which make me shudder to think of now. As the year progressed the outfits I made got bolder and shorter. There was one in particular, navy blue with very large white polka dots, that I wore with a bonnet made of white Michaelmas daisies tied under the chin with white satin ribbons. What can I say in my own defence? It was the sixties; I was not alone in my sartorial choices. At the time it made me feel fabulous.

I was back in Oxford having missed one term and two vacations – that equalled at least three missed opportunities to be in plays – and I celebrated by buying myself a little shift dress, the midriff section of which was made of netting. I lived in that dress. Oh, and my feet had grown a size or two bigger (bad) and for the first time in my life I had long, elegant fingernails (good). Both had grown while I was flat on my back.

The big theatre event of the summer was a production of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* with Richard Burton as Faustus and

Elizabeth Taylor as Helen of Troy. Nothing like it had ever happened before, two massive Hollywood stars coming to work on an OUDS* production with an otherwise student cast and crew. I had in fact been asked to understudy Miss Taylor – no one could quite believe that she would even make it to Oxford, since she was so frequently overwhelmed by illness, let alone survive five weeks' exposure to undergraduate drama – and though I balked at the idea of playing second fiddle, even to a Hollywood diva, I was sorry to have missed it all. I listened, with a polite but wan smile, to the adventures of the student actors who had been working with them and were now off to Rome to make a film of it for Dino de Laurentiis. The university offered me an extra year, for there was no doubt I had had to slow down and catching up with the work I had missed was going to be a grind. Now I think I was mad to refuse it (a whole extra year to read!) but then I was impatient and accepted the challenge of completing my degree in the original time. But I did tend to rush through things, glancing neither to left nor right.

A recurring memory is of sitting in a crowd – in assembly at school; at a noisy summer party; a Union meeting; on a coach full of hockey players on the way to a match – and luxuriating in the feeling that my life stretched ahead of me full of possibility. I would play with the heady notion that I could be anything I wanted: an astronaut or a deep sea diver, an academic or a gardener, a doctor or the first female prime minister. I'd always felt immortal, but now, perhaps, was the beginning of the end of that. As Dr Johnson said, the prospect of imminent death does concentrate the mind wonderfully.

One way and another it was the end of childhood, and later my friends were to tell me that I had been hard to take 'before'. Some eighteen months after my return to Oxford Hermione Lee¹ played

* Oxford University Dramatic Society

Hippolyta to my Helena in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that we took to the United States, and as we wandered through a snowy New York, she said, 'You were insufferable, you know.'

'When?'

'Before.'

'Why?'

'So arrogant. Don't worry, it's all right now.'

It puts me in mind of what Max Beerbohm said: 'I was a modest, good-humoured boy. It is Oxford that has made me insufferable.'

So it seemed that fate was taking a hand. I'd been brought down a peg or two and, lurking in the back of my mind, was a vague recollection that my father had sometimes called his school in the foothills the Seminary. Had he been destined for the priesthood? Was he a closet Catholic all his life? Why had it been hidden? And if I had been so totally ignorant of this crucial fact about him, what other secrets might be there for the seeking?