
Opening Extract from...

My Father's Fortune

A Life

Written by Michael Frayn

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Homburg

The handle of my study door softly turns. I look up from my typewriter, startled. The two older children are at school, my wife's out with the baby, the house is empty. I'm working alone on the top floor.

The door opens a few inches. Around the edge of it, with a certain deferential caution, comes a hat. A black homburg.

The year must be 1969, I realise from the internal evidence when I reconstruct the scene in my memory. No one round our way locks their front doors in 1969. But then no one still wears homburg hats. I'm looking at the last homburg in south-east London, perhaps in western Europe.

I feel a familiar touch of exasperation. Of course! Naturally! The black homburg! Just when I've got a chance to work undistracted! Why hadn't he phoned, like anyone else? Why hadn't he rung the bell, or shouted 'Anyone at home?' Why hadn't he at least taken his hat off?

The hat is followed by a pair of spectacles – a hearing aid – a trim grey moustache. And my father's familiar smile, like the sun coming up.

My exasperation evaporates in the warmth of it.

1969, yes, when I was writing my first play. It must have been. The good year, shortly before the end of his life, the year's reprieve between his first cancer and the second. He just happens to be passing, driving from somewhere in south-east London to somewhere else, on his way to put his head round the doors of building contractors and architects in Woolwich or Eltham, selling them roofing. He has always been turning up like this in my life,

unannounced, on the move, a law unto himself, excused by his deafness from the usual social conventions. Not always in a black homburg – sometimes in a brown trilby. But usually in one or the other.

When he takes the hat off it reveals the last of his trim silvering hair receding above the leathery corrugations of his forehead, and brushed precisely flat. His features are as neat and well-ordered as his three-piece suit and polished toecaps. He has a touch of Fred Astaire's lightness and quickness about him.

'Not interrupting the muse, am I?' he asks, as I make him coffee. 'Not depriving the world of some great new book?'

'It's not a book this time – it's a play.'

'Are you? Where are you going?'

'A *play*. The thing I'm writing.'

'Bit crowded at this time of year, Brighton.'

He can probably hear me, actually, even if he hasn't turned his hearing aid on. It's over a quarter of a century since he first went deaf, and I've long been used both to raising my voice and to his pretending not to understand even so, for comic effect. More smiles when my wife comes in. 'Would you like some lunch?' she asks him, but after a lifetime of softly modulating her voice she finds it almost impossible to make him hear even the vowel sounds. He's rather in rather in awe of her, though, so he doesn't like to disrupt the flow of the conversation.

'Not too bad,' he replies. 'And the children?'

'They're very well. But how about *lunch*? Something to *eat*?'

'No fear!'

'No?'

'Of course not. Up Dog Kennel Hill and across Peckham Rye.'

It's forty years since my father died. I've often thought about him since, of course. As he was when I was a child, as he was when I grew apart from him in my adolescence, as he was when we became closer again in those last years of his life. I can sometimes still feel some of his expressions on my own face and know,

even without a mirror, that I'm looking like him. And yet I'm so *un*like him! Slow where he was quick, scruffy where he was dapper, head-in-the-clouds where he was feet-on-the-ground. And inside, behind our mutual expressions, in the way we think and feel, we're totally different. Aren't we? In all the years I've spent imagining myself into the heads of characters in plays and novels I've never really tried to feel what it was like to be that rather striking real character in the homburg hat. Your parents are your parents. They are what they are.

It was my children, wondering about their own origins, who first set me thinking about him in a rather different way. They wanted me to write something about my childhood – anything about the past that I could remember, before it had all vanished from my memory for ever. Rebecca, my eldest daughter, felt that she and her two sisters – all of them now older than I was when that hat came round the door – 'had risen from an unknown place'. For a long time I resisted. How could I ever contrive to lay my hands on that lost world, which had now slipped so far away even from me?

And then it occurred to me that it was my father who was one of my last links with that elusive past, and who might take us all back to it. Once again I saw his head coming round my door – the homburg, the hearing aid, the smile. Sixty-eight years of good and bad fortune were written in the corrugations of his forehead, the crinkled skin fanning back from the corners of his eyes, and the deep curving crevasses on either side of his mouth. So many things I should have asked him while he was still here to tell me. I might even have tried to talk to him about the thing he never once mentioned, the event that in one single instant broke his life in two – that broke all our lives in two – into Before and After. Did he ever wish he could have said something about it to me?

I went back to my very first conscious memory of him. I suppose I was three years old. He had appeared unexpectedly through a door, just as he did in my recollection of him at the end of his life. And – yes – wearing a homburg hat. He was coming in through

the French windows of the dining room, just home from work, still carrying his files and folders. What makes this particular occasion stick in my mind is that I was crying, and that I lied to him about the reason. I'd misbehaved in some way and been scolded by my mother, but I felt so ashamed of my babyishness that I told him it was because I'd banged my head on the edge of the dining table.

Was it really the same man under that first homburg and the second, thirty-three years later? What had happened to him in between was etched not only into the skin of his face but deep into the core of the man himself. But then, if I was three when he appeared through the French windows, he must have been thirty-five. More than half a lifetime was written upon him already.

I go over that first encounter with him again, now I'm trying so hard to remember things, and what catches my attention this time is not my lying, or his sympathetic smile as he was taken in, but an odd marginal detail of the scene: the fact that he was coming in through the French windows. They were at the back of the house. If he'd just arrived home from work he'd got out of the car on the driveway by the front door. Why had he walked all the way round to the back garden before he came indoors?

Maybe he'd forgotten his keys. Or maybe he already had a penchant for appearing through doors unexpectedly. But, as I turned this tiny anomaly over in my mind, it occurred to me that there was perhaps another reason – something quite simple, that would explain a lot about him. If I was right, I should have to begin by tracing his path to the French windows that day in 1936 – all the way back, perhaps, to the unknown place from which he himself had arisen.

So back I've gone, as people often do when they get older, scrabbling among the birth and death certificates that marked my family's progress through the world. I've looked up the census returns and the electors' lists, and walked around the streets where my father grew up. I've tried to remember what little he told me, and to reconstruct the world as he saw it, with the problems he was set, and the pleasures and successes he found. I've made myself come

face to face at last with that event I could never talk to him about, and its consequences for him and all of us.

The quest that I'd so reluctantly begun came to occupy my mind and heart alike. I laughed aloud to myself sometimes at the things that came back to me, and at other times could scarcely see what I was doing for tears. I also discovered many things about him – and a few about myself – that I'd never known, and that took me completely by surprise.

And now, when he puts his head round my study door again and smiles at me, as he does, I see him – and myself, and the world we shared – a little differently.

PART ONE

1

Smart Lad

I see in the *Oxford Dictionary of Surnames* that the name Frayn in all its various spellings derives from the French, *fresne*, an ash tree. We were dwellers by an ash tree, and the earliest recorded variation is a William de Fraisn in 1156, who had presumably, as some proud families like to boast, 'come over with the Conqueror'. Our branch of the family, though, arrived only four hundred years or so later, and in less exalted circumstances. We spring not from twelfth-century Norman knights but from a French pirate who was terrorising the Channel in the sixteenth century. He was captured by the English and hanged at Dover. His ship, and the cargo of gold it contained, was impounded, and both ship and gold are being held in Chancery for any Frayn who can prove his descent from the pirate.

I know this because I was told it by my mother, one rainy afternoon when I was about six. The story seized my imagination, particularly the solemnity of the phrase 'held in Chancery'. I had no clear idea of what Chancery was, but I understood that it was something to do with the law, and was dark and lofty and inaccessible. I had a picture of a gloomy panelled hall, and in it, propped on trestles, a kind of Viking longship, with the piled gold gleaming amidst the thwarts. I knew it was my task in life to reclaim it. But how would I prove that I was the legitimate heir? What tests would I be put to?

What for that matter had my father already done to secure the gold? Nothing, it turned out when I asked him some years later. The reason was simple: because he'd never heard about it. By this time my mother was no longer there to ask, but I suppose she must have made the story up to keep my sister and me entertained

on a wet afternoon, just as she sometimes played the violin to us. It had never occurred to me that it didn't make any sense. Why would the pirate have had a son and heir on board with him as he raged about the Channel? Why would his ship and his illicit hoard be kept for his heirs to claim? Odd, though. The story's so circumstantial, and so out-of-nowhere. I can't recall my mother ever inventing any other piece of family history – or any other story at all.

More recently, at any rate, so I've discovered from my researches, the Frayns come from the West Country. Satisfyingly unusual as the name is in London, the nineteenth-century census returns for Devon and Cornwall are littered with Frayns, most of the men blacksmiths or locksmiths, most of the women in service. My father's father, Thomas Frayn, was born in Plymouth, the son of a general warehouseman, and rose into the world of small shopkeeping. He began his career as an assistant in a china shop, and married a greengrocer's daughter, Louisa Lavinia Allen (whose mother was illiterate – she had to make her mark when she registered Louisa's birth). Thomas progressed from working in the china shop to owning it. This turned out to be a step too high in the world, though. He apparently drank the profits, the business failed, and at some point in the last decade of the nineteenth century he brought his wife and family to London, where he found work as an assistant once more, in the china department at Whiteleys.

I can't remember now who first told me about the move from Plymouth. Not my father, who never said anything at all about his parents. I've filled out most of the details from the official records, but perhaps I got the story first from my cousin John Frayn Turner, a fellow writer. John, ten years older than me, remembered that our mutual grandmother had a rich Devon accent, and it was certainly he who first told me about our grandfather's weakness for drink. I was about sixty by then, so perhaps he felt I was old enough to be trusted with some of the family's darker secrets.

Thomas and Louisa had four children, three girls and a boy, and

the six of them moved into a house in Devonshire Road, Holloway – chosen perhaps because the name reminded them of the old days. I recently took a walk round the district. Devonshire Road, now Axminster Road, is a turning off the Seven Sisters Road, part of the early Victorian development just to the east of the Holloway Road, and a cut above the slum streets that have long since been cleared in other parts of the borough. The terraces could pass for Georgian, with small front gardens and trees along the pavement – exactly the kind of street that in other districts developers have gentrified. It's plainly come up in the world a bit since my father's day, but the Seven Sisters Road and the Holloway Road, which flow through the history of the Frayn family like the Tigris and the Euphrates through the history of Mesopotamia, remain mostly working class, and I had the impression that gentrification was still rather hanging fire. I got talking to someone who had been brought up just round the corner from the house my grandparents lived in. He told me that it had always been 'a rough old neighbourhood', and he catalogued a few of the more interesting local murders.

My grandparents' house had four rooms, apart from the kitchen, and according to the 1901 census there were two other couples also living there. Presumably each of these other couples occupied one of the rooms. So my grandparents and their four teenage children must have been living in the two remaining rooms. Two adults and four adolescents in two rooms – and all ten residents, presumably, sharing the kitchen. All the Frayn children were fortunately slight, wispy creatures. And they might have been packed in even tighter. In the next census, in 1911, there's a space for the total number of children born, dead as well as living, and this records two more, born alive but with no names or birth dates.

So this was my first surprise as I looked into my father's origins; quite how poor the family had been. When he at last joined the household, on 29 January 1901, he was the eleventh human being to be fitted into the four rooms, and cooked for and washed for in the communal kitchen. They named him Thomas, like his father,

and Allen, after his mother's family. Thomas Allen Frayn. Tom to everyone as a boy, then Tommy to his wife's family in the years to come, and Tom still for some reason to all his colleagues and customers. The Benjamin, with a big brother to look after him and three big sisters to fuss over him, twelve years younger than the youngest of them.

I have only one photograph of him as a baby. He's wearing a bib, and he looks as if he has just made a great discovery – the only thing that he told me about himself in these early years: if you're given bread and cheese you can eat the cheese and chuck the bread under the table. No sooner on to his first solid food than he'd discovered the first inklings of the sharpness and cheek that were going to see him through a career of salesmanship and so many of life's waiting difficulties. Parking his car in central London, for example, fifty years after this – leaving it in front of the Air Ministry and telling the attendant 'Business with the Minister', or in front of the great north door of Westminster Abbey – 'Business with the Dean'.

My second surprise, as I looked at the 1901 census, came when I understood the significance of the final column in the return. It was to be filled in, it explained at the top, if

(1) Deaf and dumb
(2) Blind
(3) Lunatic
(4) Imbecile, feeble-minded.

And it *was* filled in. Every single member of the family except for the two-month-old Thomas was tagged with a (1). The entire family were deaf and dumb.

The first thing this shows is how cautiously you have to treat even the most apparently authoritative historical records. I never knew my paternal grandfather, because he died long before I was born, and I don't remember my grandmother, because she died when I was still not two, but I'm pretty sure that they weren't dumb – and absolutely sure that my father's brother and sisters

weren't, because them I did know. Deaf they certainly were, all of them – Nellie, Mabel, George, and Daisy – seriously deaf; I remember the struggle to make them hear anything I said. I was surprised, though, that they were already deaf as children. My father's deafness came on in early middle age. And his brother and sisters can't have been deaf from birth, because their speech wasn't impaired.

Or perhaps Mabel's *was* a bit, now I come to think of it. She certainly spoke in a strangely hushed way, as if she were in church. So did Daisy. Yes, and Nellie, and George.

What they were all suffering from was presumably, as I have discovered from the internet, late-onset hereditary deafness, for which apparently the gene has now been discovered, though I'm not quite sure what's happened to it in the three generations since then. A puzzle remains, though. If it's hereditary it's not surprising that one of the parents was also deaf. But *both* of them! Was this pure coincidence? Or had they been drawn to each other in the first place *because* of their deafness?

Four deaf children and two deaf parents. This is surprising enough. But one of the *other* couples sharing the house with them, a draper and his wife, is listed in the same way. The draper was from Devon, like the Frayns, so maybe he was a relative with the same heredity. But his wife, from Berkshire – *also* deaf! Maybe they, too, had picked each other because of their deafness . . . Maybe the two couples had been drawn to share a house because of the similarity of their marital arrangements . . . Or was it all just one great escalating coincidence?

Difficult to fathom this. Difficult, too, to imagine my grandfather selling china, and the other tenant drapery, to customers who couldn't make them hear what sort of china and drapery they wanted. More difficult still to imagine what life was like in the house, with two deaf parents, four deaf children, and two other deaf tenants, all either shouting or murmuring inaudibly to each other in the shared kitchen. Mabel must sometimes have made a particularly striking contribution to the proceedings. She was not

only deaf but simple (although reputedly sharp at cards), and was said to be often very difficult – given to wild outbursts at certain phases of the moon, when she shouted, among other things, that she wanted a man. Every now and then she had to retire to a mental hospital.

And now here's the new baby chucking his food under the table and screaming his lungs out, with his nappies being boiled on the copper . . . In the morning everyone trying to get their breakfast, and hot water for shaving, and their clothes pressed and ready for work. All of them wanting the one lavatory, which at that time was presumably a privy in the back garden . . .

In the only photographs I have of my paternal grandparents the most noticeable things about them are his dignified but somehow weary and defeated grey walrus moustache, and her shock of resiliently springy hair. My father never mentioned their deafness, any more than he said anything else about them. He never mentioned deafness at all in the various stories he told me about his childhood. Nor did he ever complain about the conditions in which he'd been brought up, or imply that in our one-family detached house in the suburbs my sister and I were being spoiled by luxury. He made life in Devonshire Road sound convivial, in a traditional working-class way. At Christmas, he said, the entire clan would gather. (How many more are there packed into these two rooms now, and queuing for the lavatory?) They would all bring their music and recitations, sleep overnight in armchairs and on the floor, and take a door off its hinges to make an extension to the dining table. Not a word about none of them being able to hear what the others were reciting or singing.

My cousin's revelation about our mutual grandfather's drinking came long after my father was dead, so it was impossible to ask him what further effect it had had on the family after the loss of the business in Plymouth. I suppose I have to imagine, in that overcrowded kitchen, not just a struggling mother, four adolescent children – one of them raving when the moon is full – four other lodgers and a squalling baby, but my grandfather coming home

from the pub the worse for wear. The nearest pub, I noted on my walk around the district, was only five doors away, which may have been the amenity that recommended the house to him in the first place. When my grandmother reproached him for never worrying how they were going to manage if he spent all his wages on drink he's supposed to have asked whether it would help at all if he sat down and did worry for thirty minutes.

I look at my grandfather's picture again, and now I see him brushing the foam off that dejected moustache, and sucking the last of the beer out of it. I take another look at my grandmother Louisa, who presumably had to keep this overladen ark afloat. Unlike him, I see, she's still managing the ghost of a smile. Just.

By 1911, when the next census was taken, the house remained almost as overcrowded as before. Nellie, the eldest daughter, who worked as a needlewoman and made dresses for the wardresses in Holloway Prison (so her daughter Jean told me), had gone off to get married, to an insurance agent, but the other children were all still living at home. George was a compositor, says the census, Daisy a music-roll librarian for a pianola manufacturer, and Mabel a printer's bookfolder. The deaf draper and his deaf wife are still in residence, but the other family has been replaced by a young nephew, Courtenay, another arrival from Devon, listed as a tailor's cutter. Whether Courtenay was deaf, like the rest of the family, it's impossible to know, because in the 1911 census the disabilities column has been discreetly blanked out, but he shares some of Mabel's other problems. My father – who curiously never mentioned Courtenay's living at Devonshire Road – often talked about visiting him in a mental hospital, where he sat in silence all day watching the hands of the clock go round. According to Jean, Courtenay and Mabel were at one point sweet on each other. Whether he reacted in the same way as her to the phases of the moon I don't know, nor what life in the house must have been like if he did.

The second picture I have of my father as a child shows him at

about the age of five, wearing the sailor suit in which small boys were traditionally photographed then. He looks, not wispy and self-effacing, like his siblings, but even cockier than he did as a baby. And cocky he was going to remain, for another forty years at any rate.

The only thing he told me about his education is that at the local central school he was given personal tuition in French by a master who perched on the desk in front of him and brought the register down on his head each time he made a mistake. As a teaching technique this was remarkably effective – it knocked every single word of French out of him. I never heard him essay even a humorous '*je ne sais quoi*'. He was also a boy soprano in the local church, and by the time his voice broke he had risen to become head choirboy. As an introduction to religion this served almost as well as the French lessons did to French. He retained a strong lifelong distaste for every aspect of it.

Something stuck, though, something that gave him a lot of pleasure over the years: the music. Often as we drove somewhere together he would lift up his voice, by this time tenor but still sweet and strong, and sing the soprano line from one of the old oratorios. He knew most of the great Baroque standards, but the aria that he sang over and over again was I think from Stainer's *Crucifixion*: 'Fling wide the . . . fling wide the . . . fling wide the gates, / For the Saviour awaits . . .' Whether he ever got any further than this, to a bit where the gates were at last open and the Saviour admitted, I can't now remember.

'Smart Lad Wanted.' This was the formula with which a lot of job advertisements used to begin. The smartest lad that any employer could ever wish for is now on the labour market: Tom Frayn, leaving school at the age of fourteen, and just starting out in the world to help support his family. I have a number of photographs of him taken over the next few years, and you can see – he's as smart as a whip. So handsome, so poised. Three-piece suit, hair slicked straight back, flat against his skull. In one of the pictures

he has a nonchalant cigarette between his fingers. In another his adolescent face is crowned by an enormous grey homburg. Already.

His first job is as an office boy in the Hearts of Oak life assurance company in the Euston Road. Somehow each morning he emerges from the chaos of that tiny kitchen at the top of Devonshire Road with a clean collar, his suit pressed and his shoes shined, and walks down to the Seven Sisters Road to get the tram. The First World War is in its second year, and Tom Frayn is enjoying the fourth piece of good fortune in his life, though he probably doesn't appreciate it at the time. The first was the quick wits he was born with, the second was the brother and sisters who have made him such a favourite, the third was the mother who has somehow kept the family going – and the fourth is being only fourteen years old, and too young to be called up before the war ends.

At some point in the next few years he advances from office boy at the Hearts of Oak to wages clerk at McAlpines, the big building contractors. He goes to New*cast*le, as he always call it later, with a stressed short 'a', the way the people who live there do, and travels round the city every Saturday in his teenage homburg with a bag of cash, paying out the labourers who are installing sewers and culverts. He must still be in London, though, or back there again, when he has the fifth great stroke of fortune in his life. This is after the war's over, on a winter's day early in 1919, when he runs into a friend of his called Bert Crouchman. I imagine it must be a Saturday, because that evening there's a party, to which Bert is going because a girl he's seen called Vi will be there, and he's hoping to get himself introduced to her. Would my father like to come with him?

Tom is said to have only two interests in life at this point. One is dancing. He's a good dancer, deft and easy in the Fred Astaire manner. The other, no doubt exercised in tandem with the first, is girls – and I suspect, from what follows later, that he also has a certain talent in this department. I don't suppose he takes much

persuading. All the same, I can't help feeling an instant of vertigo when I think about the sheer fortuitousness of this meeting with Bert Crouchman, and the arbitrariness of Tom's response. A lot is riding on this one brief moment while Tom makes up his mind. My existence, for a start, and my sister's. The lives of my three children and my sister's two. Of our eleven grandchildren . . .

He shrugs. He'll go to the party.

A close call there. Or so it seems to me now, as I write this, ninety years on, and the implications of that passing exchange finally strike me.