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Semi-Detached

Griff Rhys Jones

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1. Into the Woods

The first thing I can properly remember is having breathing competitions with my father. I can recreate the sensation of lying up close to him, in my parents' bed, waiting for him to come to properly. We would have been under that pink eiderdown – the shiny satin thing, with the arabesques. It ended up in the spare room, the stitches going, fading in sunlight, but at that time, slippery and cool to the touch. It was thrown over the lot of us, crammed into the one bed on a Sunday morning. My older brother and little sister, across the landscape of imaginary hillocks, beyond the Kilimanjaro of my father's stomach, were there too, huddled up against the cold. It was cold in houses in 1960s mornings. That's why we were all in their bed. I must have been about four.

There had been previous lives in Cardiff and in Banchory in Scotland, where my sister was born. I had had a bobble hat with flaps and a pretty impressive sledge, because I have seen the photographs, but a starting point which is mine and not part of a diary or hypnotic recall is that Sunday imprisonment in my father's hum. I can feel the walrus enormity of his presence, instantly reimagine the sure, steady rhythm of his inhalations, as he dozed on, drifting in and out of sleep while I waited for him to get up.

My father never slept like a baby. He slept like a piece of agricultural pumping machinery. It was quite impossible to out-breathe him. I got dizzy trying to fill my lungs in his ponderous way, particularly when the slight fizzing whistle started up and the honking suck of a snore began somewhere

in the back of his throat. I remember worrying too, because listening to him used to make me acutely conscious of something that otherwise I did all the time without ever thinking about it.

To get back to my beginning, one weekday in March I returned to West Sussex. It was an unfamiliar route, which was good. There was a sense of exploration, which is what I wanted. At Hindhead the traffic lights in the middle of the A3 had a pre-war craziness, which was apposite. Turning left towards Haslemere, I began to pass the estate cottages, with their doors and windows in the jaundiced yellow of the Cowdrey Estate, turned off at the top of the downs on to the mile-long drive towards 'the Sanny' and plunged into a thick, wet mist. What could be more appropriate? I was visiting this place through a Powell and Pressburger special effect. My dad worked at this sanatorium as a junior doctor. We lived in 'the Lodge', sometimes known as 'the Engineer's Lodge', just before you got to the hospital itself. I went to a kindergarten school called Conifers down the hill in Midhurst. When I was seven he got another job, and we moved away. But the truth is I always remember Midhurst as a paradisical half-dream. And now that world of woods and paths and the little house amongst the Douglas firs was coming at me through a watery vapour condensed about dust particles, a fog of associations and half-glimpsed realities.

To the south of our house, through the trees, lay the mansion of the eminent Australian chest doctor who ran the place, Sir Geoffrey Todd ('the Old Man'). So if it had been a Sunday, after my father had dragged himself out of bed and complained loudly about how he hated socializing, we would have gone down there for pre-lunch drinks.

Our hair would have been plastered down to our scalps

with water. (Run the comb forward with a harsh, agonizing scrape and then flick to one side.) Our grey socks would have been pulled up tight to the bottom of the knees, anchored there with tiny elastic garters, so that no more than an inch or two of white-scarred and sometimes black-pitted leg showed below our long, pleated shorts. The shorts were held in place with a snake-belt, again striped and elasticated, the ingenious 's' buckle slipping through a twisted metal hole. On top of this we would have worn a tight, woolly v-neck jumper, grey flannel shirt and, in all probability, a tie. And this was our day off.

All the grown-up males dressed in an adult version of the same get-up. Not shorts, but long grey slacks (gathered high, in pap-scratching mode), tweed jackets and tiny striped or tartan ties. Somewhere between schoolteachers and scientists, the doctors were the post-war *Punch* middle classes. They talked lawnmowers and smoked pipes: sometimes bold modernistic ones, with a corner-angled bowl. The mem-sahibs wore hooped, fullish skirts in bold patterns. And everybody drank gin and tonics, probably in special gin and tonic glasses. It wasn't an affluent time, but it was an aspirational time. They dressed like the Royal Family – like Prince Charles still dresses.

We children had to stand properly in a little row until Lady Todd had paid us due attention. Like all the grown-up ladies she was rustly and powdered, but slim and angular in her Australian way, and with Antipodean shorter hair, bolder earrings and the twinkle of sophisticated, amused condescension in her eyes. And then we got a Coca-Cola. It was a measure of how far into the stratosphere these people were that they dispensed real Coca-Cola from a deep fridge somewhere in 'the servants' quarters'. These were bare and functional, compared with the glittery, shiny Todd front room

with its French windows opening on to an achingly bright lawn. Real Coca-Cola was something we never saw anywhere else. Not simply because it was an expensive luxury, but because, like American comic books and ITV, it was something inherently corrupting, although not apparently to Australians. At Sir Geoffrey Todd's house it was served in little metallic cocktail beakers in a translucent blue, or a glittering pink, which went cold with their contents. Oh! The icy perfection of it.

Once, the Old Man himself took my father and me up to his attic. We had to mount a ladder which he pulled down from the ceiling and crawled through a hatch under some dark planking to emerge in the middle of a model railway system of stupefying complexity. Hundreds of feet of rail snaked past gasometers, stations and signal boxes, not just in single measures, but sometimes laid six in flank. And then he flicked a switch and plunged us into darkness, and his entire marshalling yard landscape lit up. Each train was illuminated, obviously, but so were hundreds of free-standing lights on tiny gantries. The Pullman carriage windows revealed little lampshades inside. Sir Geoffrey sat in the middle of his network, rattling his personal fairy-lit trains hither and thither though the gloom, and puffed on his pipe.

What was it about doctors and do-it-yourself enterprise? In Blake Morrison's book *When Did You Last See Your Father?* he writes about his GP dad and his ever-handy tool kit. My friend Rebecca Hossack's doctor father built his own house in the Australian desert, decorated throughout with home-made murals. Perhaps the other doctors and their families, a little squiffy from their G and Ts, spent the rest of the afternoon playing tennis together on the sanatorium's private courts, but not my daddy. He would have got bored, falling asleep in the middle of tea and snoring embarrassingly. He

preferred to sequester himself in the middle of his own territory, using his family as a sort of human shield, and then make things.

Elwyn, my father, was the youngest of four siblings after a five-year gap. 'Some sort of mistake, it seems.' He had been brought up by his older sisters, Megan and Gwyneth, his mother, 'Nain', being rather too grand in a Welsh, pompous way to bother with him. 'Spoilt,' was one verdict. He was certainly indulged, nannied and babied in a manner that the matriarchal Welsh enjoy. He seemed to me to spend an inordinate amount of time in the bath. He loved sweeties, and sought out ice creams with which to treat himself. He looked like a baby, too, soft, pink skin, a large, growing belly, pale, scrupulously scrubbed, chipolata hands, with the doctor's fingernails always trimmed to nothing. (There were nail scissors everywhere in our house.)

He would sit at Sunday lunch with a napkin tucked up into his shirt front, knowing that he would splatter it with my mother's nursery cooking. Casseroles and chops and frozen peas were favourites. Rissoles, shepherd's pies, big cream puddings or trifles followed. He was happiest at his own table, in his own house, where his indulgent habits and self-centred shyness could be annexed from the demands of any normal social order. He never went to any party without grumbling. In later life, despite working at three different hospitals, he came home every day for lunch. Other people and their English social rituals frightened him. Once at a wedding, a dreaded occasion, he advanced towards the greeting party and kissed the bride's father by mistake. With strangers he could be curt and offhand, wanting, I think, to escape human confrontation and its attendant boredom.

He drank little, gave up smoking when it was discovered that it caused cancer, never played golf or joined any clubs,

and had few close male friends, particularly in later life. He never seemed to have an affair. (It would have been unthinkable, actually, impossible to imagine.) He never seemed to join any committees, or even the adult world. He supported himself on a trolley of his own dignity. He was like Arthur Lowe. I can never catch a glimpse of prickly, slightly fat, shy, silvery-haired men, men like Edward Heath, without being reminded of him. They are a type: sexless, defensive, often intelligent in a boffinish manner, self-important, and I always rather love them.

We can't really get to know our fathers as other people until we are almost grown up ourselves, and by then they have become that immutable bundle of fixed opinions and uncurious appetites – the middle-aged man. But in Midhurst, Elwyn would have been in his mid-thirties: young, ambitious, a bit of a comer in his own way, I suppose. He would have been part of a close-knit hospital fraternity, modelled much on the army – quite a difficult man for me to get at through the fog.

I parked my car in 2005 opposite where we had lived. Even though the mist still hung around I could see that a lot had altered. For a start the woods were a car park. I had arranged to meet the communications and PR manager of the hospital. She showed me into her office. I trailed mud over her white carpet. I apologized. She passed me a history of the sanatorium as I sat down. 'Your father was the engineer here?' she began briskly.

'No, no. He was a doctor.' I was disconcerted by this. I nearly said consultant, but that was still some years ahead.

'He was the only one with membership in the place,' my mother had explained only a week before. She meant membership of the Royal College of Physicians, an extra qualification he had worked hard to get. 'If they had any

problems they would all come running to him.' He had asked her to show the head chef how to feed diabetics. She had invented a lot of recipes to his instruction.

I came upon a photograph of the 'World Conference on Tuberculosis' in the history book the PR manager had handed me. 'That's him!' I nearly shouted. But I was relieved to find him there, looking perhaps a little tense in the back row compared with the exaggerated bonhomie of the senior consultants who were slouching at the front, but he had been young then, a junior medical assistant.

Now a general hospital, with a cardiac unit which treats morbid obesity amongst other things, the sanatorium where my father worked was built at the turn of the twentieth century to house TB patients. They had no idea then how to cure the 'Bluidy Jack', but they sought means of mitigating its effects. There were expensive clinics in the Alps, like Davos (the inspiration for Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*) and whole townships in the balmy air of the South of France. While the Kaiser ordered up dreadnoughts to compete with what he had seen in Britain, Edward VII struck back with a consumption hospital. The Germans had hundreds of showpiece treatment centres. Britain was falling behind in the medical race. With money made available by Casells, his financial advisors, the King personally supervised the project and stayed in the grounds, in 'our' house, which had been painted red and gold to make him feel at home.

Apparently he entertained his mistresses there. If he did it would have been in unaccustomed pokiness. The place was a miniature Arts and Crafts cottage with tall chimneys, high gables and tiny rooms. Not much room for King Edward's renowned copulation harness in the Lodge. Nonetheless, if you drove a pedal cart at speed into a skirting board, the

white paint would flake off and reveal red and gilt trimmings underneath.

My mother explained across the kitchen table how we got there: things I had never known, never really sought to find out. After the war there had been too many doctors leaving the army. Originally my father had done extensive research in diabetes and its effect on eyesight for his PhD. But his consultant had asked to borrow his results to use in a lecture and then published them in the *British Medical Journal* as his own. He thanked my father in his acknowledgements, 'for his help', but the research programme had become useless. 'He was very upset,' my mother told me. The simplicity of the words and her direct look showed me how she must have helped him through it. I knew his capacity for worrying. 'We carried his notes around for years. They filled a tea chest and in the end I made him burn them.' After that he was advised by another senior doctor, angry on his behalf, to specialize in chest medicine. He had gone to Banchory, a hospital near Aberdeen, which coincidentally featured on a television programme I presented in 2003.

'Shall we show you round?' the PR manager at Midhurst asked.

The sanatorium had recently gone into liquidation. 'The best thing for it', because it had enabled a rescue package to be put together. The rescue was of the building itself. All the space and light that the architect Percy Adams had deliberately designed into the wide corridors, the Arts and Crafts staircases and the shuttered balconies (recently declared unsafe for patients) would soon go into up-market apartments. They would certainly take me to the Lodge, but would I like to see the San first?

It is difficult to walk down the corridors of your past in the company of a tour guide. I had to apologize and leave

them waiting as I stopped and stared into the hospital stores. The hospital stores! We used to be taken there for sweets, but I tried to remember. There was always something strangely forbidden about it, wasn't there? Was it some memory of the anxiety? We had to be extra good because it was inside the hospital.

We walked out. There was the cricket pitch. My father hated having to play cricket. But that would have been the only time we were ever allowed in these Gertrude Jekyll gardens. I could remember him in the whites and being given his gloves to hold. I could remember playing on the dry-stone walls with those purple flowers which hung out of them in great swags. 'And over there,' I said, pointing across to the trees. 'Isn't that where Sir Geoffrey Todd would have lived?'

'Oh yes. Of course, they're all private houses now.'

I hoped our house would provide clues or starting points. But I toured behind Tricia, and David Hayward, in a semi-anaesthetized trance. If I pushed, just a little, I could remember the texture and colour of two grey blankets, with a red check in them, and the glow of the tiny Christmas tree in a wooden tub, and even the holly-berry-red curtains, but only in my mind. Nothing in the shape of the place started anything. I stood there hopelessly. I couldn't even say which bedroom had been which. The shape of the fire-surround was familiar, but it had been painted over. The place had anyway been used as an office. 'It can be very cold in here,' said David. 'There are three outside walls with the windows facing north.' At the base of the staircase the gloss white had been knocked away to reveal red paint underneath; the only evidence that this was in fact the same house.

In due course we had to have our own train set. My brother and I slept in a tiny room with a sloping roof, though

I could not identify which one in 2005. Our beds were shoved up against the wall, because one corner gradually became occupied by my father's version of Sir Geoffrey Todd's railway empire.

The railway was constructed on a made-to-measure platform, which lifted on one side so that you could clamber in and sit in the middle. It was much less detailed than Sir Geoffrey's. It ran on grey rails instead of individually sleepered tracks, but there were Airfix stations and a brown WH Smith newspaper stand with the books and newspapers on sale in incredibly tiny writing on the side, which added a splash of authenticity to the grey plastic platform.

But wait, wait, wait! Here we go. This is doing it. This is opening the file in my memory. The speciality act was the mail coach. Some sort of hook arrangement hung by the side of the track. There were several tiny red plastic lozenges with a loop at one end, supposed to represent mail-bags. You hung one on the hook, set the train in motion and it would pick it up, carry it on to the body of the red mail coach with a satisfying click and, because it was so small and the terrain proportionately was travelling past so quickly, it all happened at super speed; a quick whizz-click and it was in. No matter how hard you concentrated it was almost impossible to spot the mechanism in action. It just happened. Whizz-click. And better than that, it disgorged the same mail-bag lozenge into a special black plastic collector chute further down the track, as the train rattled on, around my father's frankly rather lurid landscape.

His hills and tunnels were rudimentary affairs, but my father liked to paint them in blazing oils. It was the same 'pointilliste' manner he had once used to do the view from his house in Cardiff. Perhaps he was going through a Churchillian phase at the time. There were splodgy impastos of trees and walls,

as if the major inspiration of Monet had been 'Yes, I could probably manage something like that, too.'

But Elwyn was mainly transfixed by woodwork; sawing and glueing at the kitchen table, to the despair of my mother, never changing out of his 'good' clothes and carrying sawdust through the house. The boys got the railway platform. My sister got the doll's house (not quite as good as the one he made earlier for my cousins in Gloucester, which had an opening front, stair rods on the stairs and an array of clunking great electric switches hidden in the lean-to round the back); Helen's was a flat-fronted, four-storey cupboard with a dormer roof, but it was painted a sticky white with a poisonous green creeper up the front, spotted with cabbage roses; a Kees Van Dongen, Post-Impressionist influence for a change.

Later came a full-sized puppet theatre and puppets, animal hutches, shelves, cupboards, record boxes, garden fittings, walls, garages and an entire boat. Meanwhile in Midhurst he moved on to a tree-house in an oak tree up at the back of the clearing. It had Tyrolean peep-holes, and a real pitched roof. Having got that far, he set to work on a section of the woods themselves. He got into brick-laying (more Churchill?) and built himself a giant barbecue which could have doubled as a field kitchen for a battalion (mind you, I suppose there were an awful lot of Australians around the sanatorium). Others might have settled for an old oil-drum, but we got a pit. He laid foundations and constructed a sort of Vulcan furnace. An old wash-pot was inserted into a brick surround which climbed up to a towering, oblong chimney. It vied with the kitchens of Hampton Court.

In 1988 the hurricane had come at the south-facing slopes of Easebourne Hill like Thor with a strimmer. The entire pine forest behind the house was mown flat. It had quickly

been replanted, but nearer to the Lodge than before. The new wood had grown up in thick, serried lines. It was already about twenty feet high when I plunged into it in 2005. I was back in a metaphor. My widely spaced, wooded, open playground had been smothered with an overplanting of reality. I stepped over a chicken-wire fence and found myself in a beige, dead world. There was no path at all. It had been obliterated. Within minutes I lost every sense of direction. Instead of finding the things I wanted in memory-bank wood – the pet cemetery, the tree-house, the barbecue – all I got was a thick, claustrophobic maze. I quickly got lost. I began absurdly to panic. I literally couldn't see the wood for the trees.

When I suddenly burst through back to the edge of the garden right in front of the house, almost by accident, I kicked into a brick. It might have been a brick from the barbecue, covered in a thick green moss. I noticed there were others around. I felt like a detective in a Polish film, searching for evidence of some past atrocity. It was damp and cold. What did it signify anyway? What had I expected to find? Bones?

Did we ever use the barbecue much anyway? Elwyn certainly built himself a picnic area to surround it, using massive half logs, dipped in a preservative that never quite dried. The accompanying benches were anchored to the ground, just a stretch too far away from the splintery tables. He was very proud of it. We were too. He must have ordered a patent glass cutter from a magazine, because I remember the trees were hung with half-bottles in wire cradles, holding candles. Everybody was called around to drink gin and tonics, eat the burned sausages (how could they be anything but incinerated in the improvised blast furnace) and swat the midges, until my father announced, as he habitually did, 'Well, I don't know about you, but I'm off to bed now.'

What a dad! Except of course he was always a little remote, busy at something, perpetually screwing or sanding, glueing or painting, and when he wasn't, he was down the hill at the hospital, where we seldom went.

We went everywhere else. Perhaps because my father was so diligently occupied, and my mother so understanding, we were released into the wild as no parent would dare do today. There were strict times we had to be back: for lunch, supper and bed. We must have gone to school, but I only remember my time in Midhurst as a pre-lapsarian paradise of feral gangs.

The Lodge sat on a little promontory above a drive that led a few hundred yards down the hill to the main hospital, hidden from view by the woods. The trees crept up on the other side of the white road too, fronted by a few mountain ashes and the occasional giant chestnut.

Behind the house was a little fenced garden; beyond that a stretch of grass, traversed by a path; and beyond that more of the enclosing trees. They were tall Douglas pines with red, scaly trunks. We thought they were useless, because, although they had branches, the branches started twelve feet above our heads and they were impossible to climb. Miles up there somewhere, they formed a canopy of dark green fir, which groaned in high winds.

The floor of the wood was thick with pine needles, soft underfoot, even and clean and slightly bouncy. 'The buxom, rosy-faced and high spirited patients' were discouraged from drinking and given the gardens to till. They also went for walks, which were 'measured' so that just the right amount of exertion could be prescribed. The walk past the back of the house was one of these. This was where we buried the family pets: in the middle of it. The hamster went into a shoebox coffin with a wooden cross made of twigs. There was

Winston, an angora rabbit. (My father claimed my mother shaved it for its fur and it died of the cold.) We liked our graveyard so much that we took to searching for other corpses and carried dead birds and squirrels to be buried in state, and once, triumphantly, an adder squashed down the road next to the fuchsia bushes. Thus the passing-away of a loved one became bearable to the infant psyche. Or rather we became all too keen for our pets to hurry up and die, and took to examining the tortoise with the blue cross on its back, the guinea pigs and Bella the dog for signs of imminent mortality. (Wasn't there a donkey too? Now that would have been a funeral.) We liked our ceremonies and the jewels and cotton wool in the caskets, but best of all we liked revisiting the plots for a touch of disinterment. We dug up a woodpecker over and over again to scare ourselves with the shiny white maggots, until my mother caught us at it and chased us off.

We'd have run on down the path, now eradicated. One second and you were in the woods, thirty seconds and you were gone. The undergrowth was surprisingly dense, good for camps and ambushes, but scratchy to push through in shorts.

Just along the way, heading west, the path crossed a ride cut through from the back of the main hospital building, lined with massive rhododendrons. There was some unwritten rule that we were never to be seen by the hospital staff, and most particularly the patients. It would give them some sort of fit, apparently. So when we decided to climb the giant larches, we had to scoot across to get to them.

A family gang, as opposed to a school gang, involves a variety of ages, including an unwanted baby figure, who has to be held by the hand, one of the boys from the Benicky family, several girls and an older brother who goads the younger brother (me) into life-threatening situations.