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Opening Extract from...

Seeing Things

A Memoir

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STROKING BEES



I. Going back.

On a dull day in the early 1990s, I took the number 13 bus to Hendon, got off at the corner of Shirehall Lane and walked along it towards the house where I was born.

Shirehall Lane, a quiet suburban street, was definitely familiar. The big elm trees had gone but the same houses were there, though they seemed smaller and closer together than I remembered. But as well as that, something was different, something was missing. Then I saw what it was: people. Nobody was coming or going, nothing was happening. The street was deserted.

As I walked I tried to conjure up the people who used to be about. For a start there were two sorts of ice-cream man, Wall's and Eldorado. They would be coming along on their box-tricycles, pinging their bells. Errand boys on their heavy bikes would whistle as they passed. The dustman's cart had two big horses. The rag-and-bone man had one very small horse which pulled a small cart loaded with strange articles. The ice-man had a noisy black lorry

which dripped. He carried a huge gleaming block of ice on a sacking pad on his shoulder, holding it with a pair of fearsome black tongs – I was afraid of him. Hopeful people with suitcases were going from door to door selling things – brushes, laces, insurance, salvation – to the housewives in the houses.

I turned the corner into the cul-de-sac and saw a line of small, shabby, semi-detached houses. In 1925, in one of these, number four, I was born and had spent the first ten years of my life. I walked up to number four and stood in front of it. No wave of recognition came over me, no golden memories flooded back into my heart. The only feeling I had about that poky pebble-dashed house was that it was quite extraordinarily small.

Then, gradually, I began to realize what was wrong. In those days I had been much nearer the ground. So, rather creakily, I lowered myself on to all fours, leaned forwards, nudged open the garden gate with my head and peered in at child, or perhaps large dog, level.

That did the trick. The first thing I saw, just inside the gate, was a piece of thick metal pipe sticking up out of the ground. On top of it was a small metal box with a curved top and a grille in its side. I don't know what it was – a drain-ventilator perhaps – but sixty-five years before I had known it well and had enjoyed its company. I now looked at it with great affection, recalling very clearly the feel of its sun-warmed metal under my hand.

Beyond the pipe-thing, under the skinny privet hedge, I could feel again the black beetly earth between the roots and, behind that, at the foot of the house, I saw with a shudder the violent texture of the edge of the rendering. There the bottom of the thick stony skin of the house had curled up and broken off, leaving a jagged edge of powdery cement to moulder away and suppurate shiny brown pebbles. The mixture had fallen as a loose gritty scree against the side of the house. It was still there.

Feeling slightly foolish, I hauled myself to my feet and dusted off my knees. So, yes, that was the house. I now recognized the raised brick path which wended its way from the gate to the front doorstep. But it was only three paces from end to end, and where was the wide lawn where the tall horn-poppies grew? I had roamed

the flower-beds lifting off their pointed hats so that the bright yellow-gold flowers could spread out in the sun, and when a bee landed on a flower I would stroke its back with my finger.

My mother had been quite alarmed when I told her about stroking the bees. She seemed to think it was the wrong thing to do, but I was very close to them and I was sure they didn't mind. I think she may have told me not to do it any more but I don't remember whether or not I obeyed her. I wore a pale blue sort of blouse and padded pants, and in the sunshine the front garden was my kingdom.

I could remember stroking the bees quite clearly but equally clearly I could see that the garden in my memory had absolutely no connection with the garden in front of me. So, rather dispirited, I turned away. Going back hadn't really been a lot of help. I realised that if I wanted to see how things were all those years ago I would have to rely on the pictures that were already in my head – if I could find them.

As I walked away I tried to look at the inside of the house as it had been when I was young. The first thing I saw, on my mother's dressing-table, was a jar shaped like a small casserole. That was magical. Except for the knob on the top which was a clear mauve-coloured marble, it was made of pale purple translucent glass. When I lifted the lid, very carefully as it was crisp and fragile, it would ring like a bell. The jar was completely filled by an ephemeral ball of swan's down which, if I lifted it by its ribbon-tag, would spring softly out and release a cloud of marvellously smelling pink powder, so fine that it floated in the air. Sometimes the cloud would float into a shaft of sunlight where it would light up like a flame.

Most of my parents' bedroom was occupied by an immensely tall four-poster bed. This had fluted pillars of shiny dark wood. The flutes bulged slightly but were held together by a tight concave band of the same wood, amazingly smooth and delicate of form. I would wrap my arms around these pillars, stroke them and gaze into the rich darkness of the wood. That great bed was a different place from the ordinary world. The deep pillows and the wide eiderdown were a haven of luxury and indulgence. One of the

privileges of being ill was to be moved from my thin-skinned iron bed to lie in splendour in the big bed, to be cosseted and made special. There I would float in absolute happiness, knowing that I was in the safe centre of life.

My brother John was three years older than me. We slept in the back bedroom, which we shared with a tall linen-press like an open-fronted chest of drawers and a large wickerwork laundry skip which crackled and clicked to itself during the night.

Other sensations came back: the rich taste of the leather pram strap which I chewed, the delicious cold flavour of a Wall's penny Sno-frute, the smell of roses. Daisy had a wide blue bowl in which she would float big roses from the garden. This stood on a table just below the height of my nose, so I could lean on it and gaze across the wide landscape of roses, watch some luckless insect clambering from petal to petal, and sniff my heart full of the glorious scent.

There was music too. In the downstairs back room stood a tiny piano-like instrument called a Dulcitone. Our housekeeper Elsie would sit at it and press the keys with one finger. For her it would play 'Baa, Baa, Black Sheep' in delightful tinkly tones, like a carillon of chiming clocks. It wouldn't do it for me. However hard I hit the keys and shouted the words, it refused to play that song or any other. I hated it.

The front room, which we weren't always allowed to go into, had a powerful smell of its own. It was a darkish room, lined entirely with books, and it contained my father's intriguing roll-top desk, which had pigeonholes and sliding drawers and strange interlocking containers. I remember the day my brother and I discovered, third along in the bookshelf to the right of the fireplace, a heavy German book called *Die Erotik in der Photographie*. The text was of course incomprehensible but the many photographs of interestingly undressed ladies were deeply fascinating. Some of the photographs were printed side by side in pairs. I discovered that if I held the book up and allowed my eyes to look right through these photographs, beyond them and away into the distance, the images would merge until at last a voluptuous three-dimensional form materialized on the paper. I was proud of this accomplish-

ment and with the right glasses on I can do it to this day, but sadly the allure of the coy Teutonic lovelies has diminished.

On a tall table in the window stood a gramophone with a magnificent polished-wood horn. Sometimes, late at night, this could be heard playing scratchy German tangos.

The smell of that front room lingers to this day in the drawers of my father's desk, which is now in my study. It is the smell of briar pipes and tobacco, mixed with the rich scent of cigar boxes. It brings back clear memories of the place, but not of the people.

But there is one incident in which I can recall the people – both myself and another person – with dreadful clarity. I was standing on the doorstep of the house next door where John's friend, Russell Wright, lived. I banged on the door as usual. Mrs Wright opened it. As usual I said: 'Can I come in?' Mrs Wright looked down on me sternly from a great height and, unexpectedly, said: 'No. You can't.' Then she added: 'You don't come knocking on other people's doors saying "Can I come in?" That's rude! That's what rude, naughty children do.' Then she slammed the door in my face.

I stood there, profoundly astonished.

From that moment on I think I began to be more aware, or perhaps more wary, of people; certainly so of Mrs Wright. I think my wariness may have taken the form of an anxiety to please. I know I liked to try and find things to say that would interest people and so cause them to feel friendly towards me. Little pieces of information would lodge in my otherwise unoccupied mind and when what seemed to me an appropriate moment came up, I would bring them out.

On Saturday mornings the milkman always came to collect money. He yodelled, 'Milk-oh,' as he came up to the door and clanked his metal basket on the step. I ran to open the door and, while Elsie went to fetch his money, I leaned nonchalantly against the door-post to have a chat.

I said: 'You don't look like a dog.'

He said: 'I'm not a dog.'

I said: 'Muvver says you are.'

'Does she?'

'Yes. Muvver said the milkman's a dirty dog because of the short change, and you're the milkman.'

This incident caused a lot of noise, and later a lot of head-shaking and glaring was done at me. I felt profoundly guilty and very ashamed, a feeling that was made worse by the fact that I didn't actually know what it was that I had done wrong.

Perhaps if I had known that this pattern was going to be repeated throughout my life I would have taken more notice, but at the time I think I put it out of my mind quite quickly and went to watch the milkman's horse, whose behaviour was more reliable.

While he did his deliveries along the street, the milkman would leave his horse and cart outside our house. He would put a nosebag on the horse's head. I would watch the horse sniff and snort into the bag of bran and oats that was fixed over its nose and then, suddenly, throw its head and the bag high up into the air in a cloud of dusty chaff. Then it would lower it gently to the ground and go on munching.

I have since learned that horses do this for a reason. They do it in order to bring the heavy oat-grains up from the bottom of the bag so that they can eat them. That was a disappointment: I thought it was just *joie de vivre*.

II. Wonders.

Even though I can remember their names, Elsie, Amy and Peggy, and I know I was fond of them, I can't recall exactly what our housekeepers looked like. But – even though she wasn't always there and when she was it wasn't always easy to attract her attention – it was my mother Daisy who was my refuge and haven. I would like to be able to describe her as she was in those very early days, but it is quite impossible. As I try to picture her I find myself folding softly into her safety, which was a place from which no comparisons could be made, a place where it was good to be, a place where there were good times.

Bathtime was particularly good. It was presided over by a large

copper-coloured geyser at the far end of the bath. This had a sort of swivel tap which Daisy would turn on and light with a match. A bright finger of blue and yellow flame would spring from it. Daisy would turn on the water tap and then deftly swing the flame round into the interior of the geyser. There came a moment of thrilled anticipation and then the whole geyser went 'WOOF' and seemed for a second to be so full of flame that it must burst. After that it settled down to a gentle roar as the hot water poured out of its spout and splashed into the bath.

In those days the bath seemed much larger. There were lots of waves and drifts of foam, a rubber duck, elusive soap to slither after, a long scratchy loofah and Daisy's huge sponge which drank up so much water that you could hardly lift it. My brother would be at the other end making even more waves and ill-treating the duck. Then, after the bath, there would be big warm bath towels and running about with nothing on and after that sitting up in bed in flannelette pyjamas being told a story.

Taking a bath was never a particularly private activity in our house. John and I would wander in and out of the bathroom while Daisy was in the bath, to talk of domestic matters or make enquiries about anatomy. This was quite ordinary.

I think my father, Ray, may have been a bit less hospitable. I can only remember once seeing him in the bath. He was very hairy and his body seemed to fill the bath almost completely. It occurred to me at the time that he didn't need a lot of hot water for his bath and that if he had been truly bath-shaped a couple of jugfuls would probably have been enough to cover him quite adequately.

Ray is almost as hard to describe as Daisy. He was very large and very warm, with a roughish pelt that smelt faintly of tobacco smoke. Being an author, he was usually busy in his study but even so he did observe certain ceremonies. Every Saturday I was given my 'Saturday Penny'. Ray would solemnly make the presentation and then he and I would put on our coats and walk along to the sweetshop to spend it.

Ray had a large woolly overcoat and a large furry-backed hand. When walking beside him I liked to get my head between his hand

and his coat and hang on to two of his fingers. This was a very comfortable arrangement because his hand was as warm as a hot-water bottle and it also kept the wind off.

The sweetshop had a marvellous array of cheap goodies. It was amazing what you could buy for a penny – four round gobstoppers which changed colour and flavour as you sucked them, or four liquorice bootlaces, or two blocks of solid lemonade or one chocolate-covered ice-cream cone, which didn't have ice-cream in it but pink marshmallow, or even, I think, a yellow sherbet-fountain with a liquorice tube in the top. This looked a bit like a firework and behaved in much the same way when you sucked at the tube and suddenly found yourself with a mouthful of explosive, prickly tasting sherbet.

Sometimes we would be taken shopping, to Golders Green on the top of a rattling, roaring open-topped bus, an experience I always hugely enjoyed because I was fascinated by all forms of transport. We would get off at Hoop Lane and walk along the wide pavement of the shopping parade. There we would often see a three-piece brass band: three strong-looking men wearing medals and playing golden instruments while another capered and saluted and smiled, rattling a box for pennies. I expect they were out-of-work ex-soldiers, but they made a lovely noise.

In the draper's shop with its broad mahogany counters all was calmness, efficiency and respectful servility, but high up, close to the ceiling, the money-jars were whizzing backwards and forwards like frenzied bats to and from the cashier, a lady in a high round desk at the centre of a web of wires.

One amazing shop had fires burning in the window with perforated tins rotating on the top. They made smoke, but this was no ordinary smoke, it was the smoke of roasting coffee; powerful, pungent stuff. I wasn't sure I liked the smell but it was devilish exciting.

The fish shop had a cold smell which came from a marble slab where wet dead fish were laid out, and also from a deep metal tray in which live eels were squiggling.

In those days quite a lot of ladies wore foxes around their

necks. These animals were very thin, with sparse hair and eyes as bright as beads. Eventually I decided that they weren't really alive but I still didn't want to touch one.

Occasionally we travelled on from Golders Green to visit our cousins the Coles, who lived in a tall house in West Hampstead.

To do this we travelled on the queen of all public transport – the tram.

Trams were tall and thin and had a special smell. This wasn't smoky and oily like the smell of buses, it was clean and almost fresh. As it started to move, a tram made a rich metallic grinding noise, *Gerdoing – gerdoing, gerdoing, gerdoing* . . . which rose in pitch as it speeded up until it became a steady song, accompanied by clangs, clunks, creaks and graunching noises as the tram swayed and pitched on its narrow rails. When it came to a sharp corner the tram would jerk sideways and lurch as if it had been barged by an elephant. To this day I don't understand why trams didn't just fall flat on their sides at every corner.

One evening, on our way back from the Coles', I saw something quite unexpected. It was dusk, almost dark, which was the best time to travel on the open top of a tram. Being above the lampposts the deck was dark except when the tram-pole spluttered and gave off white sparks as it rolled, hissing, along its wire. You could hold on to the rail and look down on the stream of cars and vans and see the people moving busily on the pavements, lit by the bright shop windows. It was like being high in the rigging of a tall ship. Standing there, scanning the view from side to side, I suddenly observed, or perhaps I should say, noted the predicament of, what I could only conclude must be a hitherto unknown section of society.

Along the Finchley Road, as along many other big roads in London, there were parades of shops, all brightly lit and thronged with people. From the top of the tram I could see that the shops themselves had dark flat roofs. Behind these, on a level with me but invisible from below, was a line of windows. Many of these were brightly lit and as the tram passed I could see straight into each room from corner to corner. I saw families having tea, people sitting reading, a boy doing his homework, a mum ironing on the

table, even a thin man and a fat lady playing cellos – all life was there for me to look at, set out in single bright boxes.

This was quite fascinating, but gradually an awful thought occurred to me. These upstairs people had no front doors. They were totally isolated. They had to live their upstairs lives in an upstairs world which was completely separate from ours.

Amy, our housekeeper, was in the cabin below. I ran down to tell her about it. I explained to her how the rooms were set side by side for the whole length of the shopping parade, so there was no way out on that level, and there was no way in or out downwards because the dark flat roof was in the way and underneath was all shops, and shops had counters which you weren't allowed to go behind and shops were often closed. I was alarmed about this but Amy didn't seem to think it was very serious. She said she was quite sure the upstairs people had ways to get in and out if they wanted to.

Eventually I had to agree that this might be the case. But even so the anxiety must have remained in my mind because, years later, I noticed some unobtrusive front doors squashed between the shops on that part of the Finchley Road, and I remember feeling distinctly relieved.

In 1930 I was five and it was time for me to go to school. I wasn't enthusiastic about this idea, mainly because it meant I had to master the intricacies of dressing in school clothes. I had to put on a thick vest with short sleeves and a grey tuck-in shirt. The rather long and complicated underpants had loops on the side through which the leather tabs of the braces had to be threaded before they were buttoned to the grey flannel short trousers. If you forgot to do this, one side of the pants came down, which made walking difficult. But I mastered the procedures and, to my surprise, found I quite liked school.

This was Woodstock School, a private school with about two hundred pupils in a spacious house and grounds on the Golders Green Road. The school was run, and perhaps owned, by a Dutch couple, Mr and Mrs de Vries.

The atmosphere of the school was friendly, gentle, respectful and firm. In general we sat still and learned things, like how to read and write and do sums, a grounding for which I never cease to be grateful. The teachers, and sometimes even Sir (Mr de Vries), were genuinely pleased if I did something well, and awarded stars for good work, stars which Sir liked to draw all over the page in elaborate patterns and many coloured crayons till they looked like bursting fireworks. The teachers were equally unhappy if the work wasn't good and didn't hesitate to sling it back and have it done again if it wasn't up to scratch. I didn't really mind that either. I liked to please.

Reading my first school reports I see that: '. . . his drawings are interesting as they frequently deal with the mechanical workings of things, particularly with water works', that I had a bad stammer and was nervous and easily upset and also, rather nicely, that: 'He is a lovable wee fellow and has delightful manners.'

The member of the staff that I remember most clearly was a lady who came in to teach us Art. I think her name was Miss Horrocks. She looked quite old, wore a long dress and beads, and spoke in a slightly wistful manner with a dark, croaky voice. The fascinating thing about her was that her hair grew in the form of intricately woven circular pads which covered each ear like earphones.

Miss Horrocks showed us pictures of people with straight noses and lots of floating hair who wore lovely flowing clothes and lived in dreamy decorated landscapes. These, she told us, were Art. I found it truly wonder-full, deeply imbued with rich but unknown significance.

What Miss Horrocks liked us to do for her was make copies of designs which she called 'tile patterns'. She had stacks of cards of these which she would hand out for us to look at and copy. As far as I can recall the patterns were mostly of formal entwinings of leaves and flowers, but the one I remember most clearly, perhaps because I thought it was a bit sinister, looked something like a partially deflated ace of spades surrounded by limp black snakes, which seemed to be fainting in coils on to the floor.

Looking back I have the impression that Miss Horrocks may have been a genuine surviving disciple of William Morris, or even of the Pre-Raphaelites, and I feel rather honoured to have met her.

For the first year or so we were taken to school and collected by Amy. Of all the various housekeepers who looked after us at Hendon, she is the one I remember with particular affection. We had even been to stay at her parents' tiny house in Leiston in Suffolk. The house and the neighbourhood were fascinating, especially the water supply which was brought from a well in shiny buckets, but I saw little of the place because I almost immediately came down with measles.

My body became very pink and knobbly and I was put to bed. I think Ray and Daisy may have been away in Paris at the time, so my grandfather, George Lansbury, who was a member of the Cabinet in the newly elected Labour Government, was alerted. Perhaps as a result of this a uniformed policeman was sent to the house to ask after my health. This event caused great excitement in the neighbourhood but it was nothing to the excitement that came a day or two later when Grandad himself turned up, really just to pat me and wish me well because by then I was over the worst of the measles. Being in bed I didn't witness his arrival but apparently the reception was fairly rapturous. These were poor people and they all knew George Lansbury.

III. Grandad.

Poor people were George Lansbury's life. He was a founder member of the Labour Party, a militant pacifist, a lifelong campaigner for social justice who had become a much loved and revered figure, known as the uncrowned king of London's East End. He it was who, accompanied by a brass band, had led the whole of the Poplar Borough Council to the High Court and on to prison, for refusing to implement the Means Test.

My mother Daisy was George's seventh child (he had twelve in all) and she was brought up in 'the movement', where there was

exciting work for all to do, including, for her, the task of impersonating, and being arrested for, Dorothy Pankhurst, the Suffragette leader.

My father, Raymond Postgate, who came from a formidably academic family, had turned against the academic life and had embraced socialism. He became a conscientious objector in the 1914–18 war, and was imprisoned and disowned by his father. He went to work for George Lansbury when he was editor of the *Daily Herald*, and married his secretary, and daughter, Daisy.

Grandad played an important part in our lives. Well, no, he didn't exactly play a part, he was just there, a godlike personage hovering somewhere above us, likely to appear unexpectedly at any moment. I can see him standing in the doorway. He was huge. His bowler hat over his big white-whiskered face and massive black overcoat completely filled the door. He also had the largest ears I have ever seen. They didn't stick out, they just covered a large area. I distinctly remember sitting on his knee and admiring them.

I already knew that Grandad was an important man, both in the family and in the world, but I didn't know that he was a truly great man, nor that he would one day stand up in the House of Commons, reprove Winston Churchill for behaving like God Almighty and tell him to hold his tongue.

Once or twice Daisy took us to the House of Commons to see Grandad at work. The great palace was guarded by policemen but they each greeted Daisy by name and had a joke with her as we passed. Daisy walked through the sombrely magnificent halls and corridors of the House as if she lived there, and at every corner the officers smiled at her and spoke. I felt very proud.

Grandad was pleased to see us and took us all to tea on the terrace that overlooked the Thames. From there we watched the tugboats pulling lines of barges loaded high with planks of yellow wood. Grandad knew the names of the timber merchants and where the cargoes were going. I was very impressed by that but I also remember feeling a bit anxious about my important grandfather, sitting on the terrace having tea with us. It occurred to me that he was supposed to be in Parliament making laws, not wasting his time having tea with children. I raised this point with him and

he took me into an inner hall of the tearoom and showed me a machine that was making ticking noises in short bursts and issuing paper tape. He lifted a piece of the tape and read it to me. Apparently it told him what was going on in the Chamber. He explained that he was allowed to go wherever he liked whenever he liked so long as he came and looked at the tape now and then to see what was going on, and if he was really needed in the Chamber to vote, a Division Bell would be rung to tell him it was time for him to go back in.

Once we actually went into the Commons Chamber to hear part of a debate. Daisy took us up into the Visitors' Gallery, from where we looked down on the lines of green leather benches and saw a few Members sitting here and there. We saw the golden mace on the table and the Speaker on his throne, wearing a wig.

Daisy shushed us because something was happening. A voice muttered: 'Mr Lansbury' and I saw Grandad rise quite slowly and look around. I was so nervous for him I felt quite sick, but he seemed perfectly at ease as he began to speak. At first he spoke quietly, but then he gradually warmed to his work and his voice swelled to a sort of musical baying, which caught and carried my imagination along and would perhaps have moved me greatly if I had had the slightest idea what he was on about. Then, quite suddenly, he stopped and sat down. Amazingly, there was no applause or cheering. A few Members shifted the way they were sitting, and grunted. Then one of them, who seemed a bit angry, jumped up and began to yap like a terrier. That caused several of the Members to get up and, rather rudely I thought, walk straight out. The debate proceeded, but we didn't stay.

My grandfather's work in Parliament, making laws, seemed to me very august and remote from our own lives, but at other times and places we had a real part to play. In his capacity as First Commissioner of Works Grandad often had to attend ceremonial engagements. As these tended to be a bit solemn he liked to bring along a grandchild to lighten the proceedings and do small tasks, like cutting tapes.

I had the honour of assisting him at the opening of Lansbury's Lido, a section of the Serpentine lake in Hyde Park which he had

had adapted for the people of London to swim in. On this occasion I became a shade over-excited and inaugurated the swimming season myself by falling in, a gesture which was much appreciated by the onlookers, less so by my mother who had to borrow a towel from the changing-rooms to dry me.

By far the most alarming thing that had ever happened in my short life took place by accident on May Day in, I guess, 1931. There was, as always, a great rally in Hyde Park, at which, as always, George gave one of his huge rousing speeches that was received rapturously by an enthusiastic, loving crowd. At some point, after he had finished speaking and was leaving, I became separated from the party. The situation was that Daisy and Grandad were in a taxi with the windows open and I was on the grass about twenty feet away from them. This would have been no problem if I hadn't been stuck in the middle of a solid cheering crowd that was mobbing the taxi to shake his hand. The crowd was shouting: 'Good Old George!' George was shouting: 'Thank you, Brothers and Sisters!' and: 'Keep up the good work!' My mother was shouting: 'That's my son over there!' and I was shouting: 'Help!' I was only at waist-height in a tight press of people that was moving as a single cheering mass, carrying me with it. I had to hang on to the arm of the man beside me to save myself from going under and being trampled.

By pure good luck the man saw me and caught my mother's eye. In an instant I was lifted bodily into the air and passed from hand to hand like a long parcel over the heads of the cheering crowd, to be posted head-first in through the window of the taxi, amid laughter and cheers of relief from the crowd, and tears of fury from my mother.