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Fathers and Sons

Alexander Waugh

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I

Pale Shadows

I shall begin with a telephone call. It was half past seven on the morning of 17 January 2001 – *annus horribilis* – when I was woken by the ringing.

'He's dead,' my mother said.

'I'll be right over.'

Quivering with excitement I told Eliza to break it to our children and to ring her father who, as planned, would act as conveyor of this dread information to the press.

Fifteen minutes later I was at Combe Florey, turning under the Elizabethan archway, looking up at my father's house. Unless I am very much mistaken, it was sulking. A gaping ambulance was parked by the perron. My elder sister was waiting for me by the front door. In the kitchen I was greeted by my mother and two sheepish paramedics. All three were ashen. Then the telephone rang – already, the first shoot of my father-in-law's grapevine: reporters from the Press Association seeking verification and a quotation.

My mother answered: 'It is hard to sum up someone so wonderful,' I heard her telling them, 'but I've been hanging around for forty years, so that says something.'

I slunk out of the kitchen and shimmied up the stairs.

In his room the curtains were drawn, but there was just enough light to acknowledge the effect: open mouth, closed eyes; face a tobacco-stain yellow. The spectacle was disconcerting but, for the

first time at least, I understood what 'He's dead' really meant. I sat on the armchair facing his bed and, for a short while, thought about death, endings, termini . . . There was no communication between us, not even in my imagination, and after a couple of minutes the stillness of the room began to oppress me. Now what? I wondered. A prayer? Should I speak to the corpse? Am I supposed to touch it?[1]

'No. That is not Papa, just a gruesome remnant.' I slunk back down the stairs to the kitchen, glad, at least, that I'd seen it.

The night before was the last time we had talked together. There was a brief exchange, until he lost consciousness.

'Ah, a little bird has come to see me. How delightful!'

'No, Papa it's me. I suppose you must have thought I was a bird because I was whistling as I came up the stairs.'

'It's a bit more complicated than that,' he replied, with a hint of the old twinkle.

I could not be surprised that the last words he spoke to me were intended as a joke: he was always funny, but those drawn-out deathbed days were – despite our finest efforts – not particularly amusing. It is not true that the dying are more honest than the living – I agree with Nietzsche about that: 'Almost everyone is tempted by the solemn bearing of the bystanders, the streams of tears, the feelings held back or let flow, into a now conscious, now unconscious comedy of vanity.'

'Everything is going to be dandy,' Papa had insisted, as he lay uncomfortable and bemused with the skids well underneath him. 'Isn't life grand?'

On the next day the papers were full of it: 'Waugh, scourge of pomposity, dies in his sleep,' trumpeted *The Times*; 'End of Bron's Age' was the *Express*'s more comic effort. His death was lamented by the Australians on the front of their *Sydney Morning Herald*, by the Americans with long obituaries in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *New York Times* ('Auberon Waugh, witty mischief maker, is dead'),

[1] When she read this passage Eliza told me that she had kissed his forehead; a valiant deed that never occurred to me as an option.

and as far afield as Singapore, India and Kenya. At home, all of Fleet Street rallied. Even the tabloid *Sun*, victim of his mockery for over three decades, sounded a plucky Last Post. Here is a typical broadside from earlier days:

> The *Sun*'s motives in whipping up hatred against an imaginary 'elite' of educated cultivated people are clear enough: 'Up your Arias!' it shouted on Saturday in its diatribe against funding which put 'rich bums on opera-house seats.' If ever the *Sun*'s readers lift their snouts from their newspaper's hideous, half-naked women to glimpse the sublime through music, opera, the pictorial and plastic arts or literature, then they will never look at the *Sun* again. It is the *Sun*'s function to keep its readers ignorant and smug in their own unpleasant, hypocritical, proletarian culture.

Undeterred, Britain's best-selling tabloid gallantly mourned his passing. 'Good Man' was the heading in its leader column that day:

> *Auberon Waugh, who has died at the age of 61, was a writer and journalist with a unique and wonderful talent.*
>
> True he occasionally used his talent to attack the *Sun*. But his wit shone like a beacon. We suspect he loved us as much as we loved him.
>
> *Our sympathies are with his family. His was a great life lived well.*

If this was remarkable the *Daily Telegraph*, a paper for which he had worked for nearly forty years, elected to treat his death as though it were the outbreak of World War III. A top front-page news story ('Auberon Waugh, Scourge of the Ways of the World, Dies at 61') propelled its readers on a five-page binge-tour of his life and work, complete with portraits, obituaries, quotations, adoring reminiscences and amused commentaries.[2] A. N. Wilson, in a piece entitled

[2]A reader's letter in the next day's paper: 'SIR – I wish to protest, in the strongest possible terms, at your decision to devote five pages to an appreciation of Waugh. Anyone with an ounce of decency would expect no fewer than 10.'

'Why Genius Is the Only Word to Describe Auberon Waugh', put down a marker for his immortality:

> He will surely be seen as the Dean Swift of our day, in many ways a much more important writer than Evelyn Waugh. Rather than aping his father by writing conventional novels, he made a comic novel out of contemporary existence, and in so doing provided some of the wisest, most hilarious, and – it seems an odd thing to say – some of the most humane commentary of any contemporary writer on modern experience.

I was pleased by these sentiments, even though Wilson's use of the word 'important' spoils the thing a little. My father, who spent his life vigorously lobbing brickbats at the whole muddled notion of 'importance', would have laughed at the idea of himself as an 'important' writer.

> My various solutions to the problems which beset the nation are intended as suggestions to be thrown around in pubs, clubs and dining rooms. If the Government adopted even a tenth of them, catastrophe would surely result. . . . The essence of journalism is that it should stimulate its readers for a moment, possibly open their minds to some alternative perception of events, and then be thrown away, with all its clever conundrums, its prophecies and comminations, in the great wastepaper basket of history.

If journalism was not 'important' to him he nevertheless held it, as a profession, in high regard. It was only when journalists took their jobs too seriously, when they tried to play an active part in shaping events, that he began to lose his enthusiasm for the press. The sole purpose of political journalism, he always insisted, was to deflate politicians, the self-important and the power mad: 'We should never, never suggest new ways for them to spend money or taxes they could increase, or new laws they could pass. There is nothing so ridiculous as the posture of journalists who see themselves as part of the sane and pragmatic decision-taking process.'

One such figure was Polly Toynbee, a hardened campaigner of the 'liberal left', whom Papa had long regarded as the preposterous embodiment of all that is most self-important, humourless and wrong-headed within his own profession. She was stung by the glowing obituaries he received and decided, while his body was still awaiting interment on a mortuary slab in Taunton, to launch an impassioned counterblast in the *Guardian*. The effect of this could not have been more explosive or more satisfactory. Just as I feared the press was about to wander from the subject, as the bleak prospect of a January burial was all that lay ahead by way of comfort to the grieving, a new fire was ignited: Papa was briefly revivified.

Toynbee's piece cannot be easily summarised because its gist was clouded by too many swipes at her enemies among the living. If her readers were either hoping for or expecting a prize-fight between Ms Toynbee and a dead man they must have been disappointed: all they got was a bewildering mêlée of emotional ringside scraps. What was it all about? Well, at the root of Ms Toynbee's article could be heard a distant wail of indignation, not so much at Auberon Waugh himself as at his influence. This she termed 'the world of Auberon Waugh', and characterised as 'a coterie of reactionary fogeys . . . effete, drunken, snobbish, sneering, racist and sexist'. Her article caused a nationwide explosion of support for the deceased. 'Never,' wrote the eminent Keith Waterhouse in his *Daily Mail* column, 'never in a lifetime spent in this black trade have I read a nastier valedictory for a fellow scribe.' 'Polly put the kettle on,' howled the *Telegraph*'s leader writer, while the *New Statesman* hit back with: 'Polly Toynbee is wrong. The writer she reviled as a 'ghastly man' should be celebrated alongside George Lansbury and Fidel Castro as a hero of the left.'

I swung my own fist into the ruckus with a riposte published on the letters page the following day:

> In an earnest piece (Ghastly Man, January 19) Polly Toynbee registered her views on the death of a humorous journalist a few days ago. 'We might let Auberon Waugh rest in peace,' she heaved, 'were it not for the mighty damage his clan has done to British political life, journalism and discourse in the post war years.'

> This was illustrated by a drawing of my father's corpse being washed down a lavatory, in much the same way as pee, paper and faecal matter is sluiced on a daily basis. Regular readers, who respect the Comment & Analysis pages, may have thought that the illustration was to be taken equally seriously as Ms Toynbee's high-minded and heartfelt article. Rest assured.
>
> Auberon Waugh's 'clan' does not intend to compound the 'mighty damage' it has already done to this country by disposing of his body in this unhygienic manner. We shall ensure that all health and safety regulations are observed when the great man is buried in Somerset on Wednesday.

If you judge my letter to have been a little low on emotion, consider another from someone called Eamonn Duffy from Welwyn in Hertfordshire which appeared next to mine on the same day:

> My immediate reaction on hearing of Waugh's death was to punch the air and exclaim, 'Good riddance!' But Polly Toynbee's reply to all the sickly and sycophantic obituaries put into words exactly how I really felt about this vile man.

The funeral was not as sombre as perhaps it might have been. The service took place three miles from Combe Florey in an Anglican church that was big enough to accommodate the hordes of friends, family, fans and newspapermen who were expected to attend. Many of them had been reminiscing about my father in the bar of the Paddington to Taunton express and arrived as a gabbling pack under a warm halo of intoxication. The sun shone as the cortège proceeded through Bishop's Lydeard where, every forty yards, a stationed police officer bowed his head in deference to its passing. Two sergeants saluted the coffin from either side of the churchyard gate as it entered. Papa, I know, would have been thrilled by this:

> The police, like most government departments nowadays, are chiefly concerned to look after themselves. They have no interest in apprehending burglars, tending to blame the house-

> holder, and small enough interest in the victims of mugging. When they rush around in vans, nine times out of ten they are rushing to the relief of a colleague who has reported threatening behaviour from a drunk – the offence itself provoked by the presence of a policeman in the first place.

For forty years the police were a target of his ridicule. Now the very force he had lambasted as idle, cowardly, oafish and self-serving had assembled itself in great style, and on overtime pay, to salute his coffin.

Uncle James Waugh dignified the proceedings by reading in an aptly lugubrious, *basso* tone from the Book of Wisdom:

> The virtuous man, though he die before his time, will find rest.
> Length of days is not what makes age honourable,
> Nor number of years the true measure of life;
> Understanding, this is man's grey hairs . . .

One of Papa's favourite songs – a ghost's courting ode from Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers*, which he used to sing out of tune with a glass of port balanced on his head – was sublimely sung in the tenor register from the pulpit: 'Oh, do not shudder at the notion, I was attractive before I died.' After that my brother and I took it in turns to read passages from Papa's journalism. Originally I wanted a piece from his diaries in which he had lamented the summer invasion of Somerset by tourists from the Midlands. On consideration, it was probably not such a grand idea for a funeral:

> The roads of West Somerset are jammed as never before with caravans from Birmingham and the West Midlands. Their horrible occupants only come down here to search for a place where they can go to the lavatory free. Then they return to Birmingham, boasting in their hideous flat voices about how much money they have saved.
>
> I don't suppose many of the brutes can read, but anybody who wants a good book for the holidays is recommended to try a new publication from the Church Information Office:

The Churchyard Handbook. It laments the passing of that ancient literary form, the epitaph, suggesting that many tombstones put up nowadays dedicated to 'Mum' or 'Dad' or 'Ginger' would be more suitable for a dog cemetery than for the resting place of Christians.

The trouble is that people can afford tombstones nowadays who have no business to be remembered at all. Few of these repulsive creatures in caravans are Christians, I imagine, but I would happily spend the rest of my days composing epitaphs for them in exchange for a suitable fee:

> He had a shit on Gwennap Head,
> It cost him nothing. Now he's dead.
>
> He left a turd on Porlock Hill
> As he lies here, it lies there still.

In the end I chose a more fitting epicedium, one that rails against the young, against television and against junk food. I remember his coming into the kitchen asking what modern muck young people were currently eating. It was always a thrill to be able to help him with information for his articles. 'Brilliant! Goodness, you are brilliant!' he would say, if I succeeded. Usually I failed and he would leave the room with a look of disappointment, but on this occasion I clearly remember his delight. The result, a simple list, was painfully funny to a fifteen-year-old at the time and to a packed church of mainly middle-aged mourners twenty years later, it shone in pristine glory:

The best things on television this summer are the National Health Council advertisements warning parents not to overfeed their disgusting, football-like, toothless children.

Over half the population of Britain is overweight. The main reason is that it sits in front of the television all day, watching advertisements. This is the average diet of your typical, spherical, 14½-year-old British kiddy, usually of indeterminate sex:

Breakfast: 4 Crunchie bars; 3 fish fingers; 1 pkt Coca-Cola flavour Spangles; 1 tin condensed milk; 2 btles Fanta.

Elevenses: 3 Mars bars; 2 artificial cream buns; ½ pt peppermint-flavoured milk; 3 pkts Monster Munch multi-flavoured crisps.

Luncheon: 3 fish fingers; 2 Twix bars; 1 tin fruit salad; 17 tea biscuits; ½ pt brown sauce; frozen peas.

Afternoon subsistence: 2lb Super-Bazooka chocolate flavour bubblegum cubes; 1 tin condensed milk; 2 small btles strawberry flavoured Lip-Gloss.

Evening meal: 7 fish fingers; ¾ pt tomato ketchup; 2 btles cherry-flavoured Panda pop; 9 digestive biscuits; frozen peas.

TV snacks: 17 Mars bars; 2 pkts Birdseye cake mix; 1 pkt raspberry jelly cubes; 1 old rubber balloon; 3 cigarette ends; 2oz (approx) dog shit; 1 tube toothpaste; 1 can Pepsi-Cola; 1 elastic band.

Needless to say, there is nothing wrong with this diet which contains everything a growing child needs. It is watching television advertisements which causes the trouble. That is what makes these National Health Council advertisements the only effective piece of satire which television has yet produced.

We had entered the church in bright January sunshine and left it in a blizzard. Banks of press and paparazzi had formed outside. A police officer at the church gate asked me if I would like them all forcibly removed. He was champing a little and foaming round the edges of his lips. It occurred to me that nothing would have given Papa greater pleasure than the prospect of a riot at his funeral, the policeman clearly wanted it also, but I was dazed, not thinking straight, and told him not to bother.

As anyone who has experienced a bereavement will remember, the months after a funeral are generally more difficult than the numb

and busy week running into it so I was lucky to have had a distraction – a book to finish, which was a biography of God. When Papa died it was almost done, but a fortnight later, over eighty thousand words were scrambled into an impossible computer puzzle and inadvertently copied in that condition on to all of my back-up files. If God seriously thought He could prevent publication of His biography by killing my father and scrambling my work, He was in error. All He succeeded in doing was to set my heart against His ways so that I produced a portrait which, in the end, was far less flattering to Him than it might otherwise have been.

Unscrambling *God* was a fret and an effort that retarded my bereavement by several months. When at last it was done and the manuscript safely delivered to the publishers, I set about reading anything I could find that my father had written. The exercise was therapeutic, or 'cathartic', as some people prefer. I could hear his voice in every sentence, which was a comfort. As I went along I copied down quotations and filed them under headings: Bossiness, Interesting Observations, Sound Advice, the Royal Family, etc. Then I read through twenty years of his *Spectator* articles – how many hundreds of thousands of words was that? – indexing every point he had made on any subject, then started the process all over again, in the same grimly tunnel-visioned vein, with sixteen years' worth of his *Private Eye* diaries. What was I doing it all for? Was it homage, filial piety, or a dementia that needed checking? I do not remember what was going through my head at the time: when I should have been working, earning money to feed the chicks and pay the mortgage, I was instead leading my family on a pointless journey of impoverishment. I was becoming what in England is defined, with contempt, as an Anorak – sad.

In September I was asked to make a speech at a ceremony in London, an annual prize-giving at which my father had officiated every year for the past decade. Afterwards a lady came up to me and stroked my cheek with her soft prelate's hand[3]: 'Oh, that was so wonderful, to hear you speaking – just as though your father were alive again.' She meant well but made me morose. I could not carry on in this way, poring over his writing and giving cheap-jack imitations for

[3] Germaine Greer, philosopher and feminist.

those of his friends and fans who missed him. If the Boswellian labour of indexing all his works had failed to prick my conscience, this lady's passing remark had at last done the trick. I had to get a life!

And so, with paternal obsessions wilfully swept to one side, I started to plan books about other things – big things: the world and how it works, the meaning of life, the riddle of the universe. A mood of renewed hope set in. Then the telephone rang. A frosty voice from the newspaper that was planning to run extracts of *God* said: 'Actually, we've been having a think about this, and what we really want is an article by you on your family, you know, something about your father and your grandfather but mixing it in with a bit of stuff from your book, yeah?' Red rag to a bull. It had been the same when I published my previous book – a history of Time – but *God* as well? 'Surely *God* is of greater interest to your readers than Auberon or Evelyn Waugh?' I demanded. A long, chilly silence emanated from the other end of the line. So I was wrong.

The effect of that irritating telephone conversation was catalytic. How could I write interesting or amusing things about the world if they all had to be passed through the Evelyn–Auberon masher before I could publicise them? If I accepted this newspaper's rotten offer, would I be clutching crudely at the coat-tails of my illustrious ancestors to draw attention to my own work? These issues troubled me. So did an annoying point Ben Jonson once made: 'Greatness of name in the father often-times overwhelms the son; they stand too near one another. The shadow kills the growth.' This whole Waugh thing needed sorting. If Papa and Grandpapa had left their clobber in my path it would have to be cleared out of the way. But time was ticking and I was unsure how to set about it. I could adopt my younger sister's wilful stance and refuse to answer any questions about my ancestors in connection with my books – or I could retrench, return to the navel-gazing Papa obsession from which I had recently extricated myself and blow the whole thing out in one almighty *atchoo*. My instinct was to go for the sneeze. Of course, there were other factors.

The critical reception for *God*, published exactly a year after my father's death, was, for the most part, as I had hoped it would be.

Those who had understood its simple message were elated; those who hadn't tried at least to pretend that they had. Some were injured at the rough way I had handled this most delicate of subjects. I did not mind which way the critics fell as long as they showed evidence of having concentrated, just a little bit, on the text. The lazy ones invariably hadn't: instead of taking issue with the contents of the book, they chose instead to rabbit on about my family.

A typical example. One critic, invited to supply his views on *God* to a national newspaper north of the border, submitted, instead of a conventional review, a long essay on the Waugh family. It started with Evelyn as 'founder, or at least, reviver of the dynasty', then moved to my father, describing him, among other things, as a 'professional snob'. From Papa the piece went to unnamed and non-existent uncles and aunts accusing them of having written 'tight-lipped, smart-arsed little social comedies of the kind that friendly reviewers call "delightfully astringent"'. Only after several hundred words in this vein did the wretched fellow finally get round to parking his critical bottom on the seat where it was originally commissioned to be: 'Now we are into the third 20th-century generation of the family firm, the children of Auberon,' he puffed. 'Really the kindest one can say of them – and, on this evidence, of Alexander in particular – is that *we kent their faithers*. Talent, sadly, does not operate upon the homeopathic principle that the greater the dilution, the greater the strength.'

Now I do not wish to take issue, especially as I have no idea if talent operates homeopathically or not; nor do I recognise the activity embraced by the term '*we kent their fathers*' – though I suspect it to be something disgusting that Scotch people do to each other in bed. No, the only reason I raise this matter is to identify a tic – one that has persisted now for three generations.

When my father published his first novel, *The Foxglove Saga*, in 1960, he was twenty years old. The temptation among critics to compare it with his father's novels proved irresistible. Reviews with titles like 'Chip Off the Old Block', 'Pale Shadow', 'Dad Waugh Had Best Move Over', 'New Writer on the Waugh Path', 'One Waugh Leads to Another' were ubiquitous. Papa's publishers were partly to blame. The dustjacket blurb, which he had originally

drafted to read '*The Foxglove Saga* is Mr Waugh's first novel', was changed at proof stage by a canny editor into '*The Foxglove Saga* is a first novel by the youngest member of a distinguished family.' And on the back cover they printed a full-page advertisement for Evelyn Waugh's latest book, *Tourist in Africa*.

Most publishers believe that commercial value can be extracted by vaunting these connections, and although they do not insist upon them, it is often hard for the young author to paddle with his pride against the welling drift of their professional opinion.

When *The Foxglove Saga* came out in the States, American publishers Simon and Schuster invited direct comparison between father and son by invoking Evelyn Waugh's most successful comic novel on the inside flap of the jacket: 'Here, in a word, is this decade's *Vile Bodies*!' It was a mistake that gave several critics in America, such as the unfortunately named Mollie Panter-Downes of the *New Yorker*, something solid to push against:

> Since the comparison has been made for us, we may now ask ourselves if the book can really be described as 'this decade's *Vile Bodies*,' and the answer seems to be no . . . There is no reason for the description to be used. The champ is still the champ, and perhaps it would be a good thing if Auberon Waugh wrote his next book as Arthur Wagstaff.

My father's next novel, *Path of Dalliance*, was published in 1963. He did not heed Ms Pants-Down's counsel in naming himself Arthur Wagstaff, but tried another tack. This time the jacket blurb made no mention of Evelyn Waugh, or of his 'distinguished family', but brazenly asserted: 'Auberon Waugh is a born writer and writes like himself and nobody else.'

'That was an attempt to put off the critics dragging in my father,' he admitted to an interviewer at the time. 'It is all so pointless – what use is it to say the book isn't as good as *Brideshead Revisited*?' But his protestations fell predictably on deaf ears as all the critics continued to compare his books, for the rest of his life, to the novels of Evelyn Waugh. In America, Simon and Schuster put out a series of advertisements that read: 'Auberon Waugh writes like

himself, but as clearly, and in the pleasantest possible way, he also echoes his father, Mr Evelyn Waugh.'

Even those who had clearly understood the heavy hint contained in the jacket blurb were reluctant to let it drop: '*Path of Dalliance* is Mr Waugh's second novel,' wrote Isabel Quigly in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 'and although he is no doubt tired of comparisons, it does rather vividly recall his father's early novels. Indeed he . . .'

The situation had not been significantly different for Evelyn Waugh a generation earlier. His father, Arthur (about whom I shall have a great deal to say in the chapters that follow), was a distinguished man of letters, a publisher, a poet, a critic and biographer; his brother, Alec, became a best-selling novelist while Evelyn was still at school, and Alec's first novel *The Loom of Youth* created a scandal by implying that homosexuality was normal in most English boys' public schools and was consequently banned in all of them. When Evelyn was at Lancing anyone caught with a copy of *The Loom of Youth* hidden under his bed was caned. Being the brother of such a famous rebel made him especially interesting to all his schoolfriends. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that when he first came to try his own hand at a novel, as an insecure seventeen-year-old schoolboy, he was apprehensive of the adverse effect that his father's reputation and his brother's fame might have on his ambitions. 'And all this will be brought up against you,' he wrote in a dedication to himself at the time. '"Just another of these precocious Waughs", they will say.'

In reviews of his early books Evelyn was introduced by critics as the 'son of Arthur and brother of Alec', which irritated him greatly. After a few years the tables turned and Alec's books were compared unfavourably with Evelyn's. 'Mr Evelyn Waugh is very intelligent and a great wit,' wrote one critic, in a review of Alec's eighth novel, *Three Score and Ten*. 'He has already written two or three books that are far funnier than those of anybody in England – his posthumous fame is assured . . . but while the gifted author of *Decline and Fall* was still in the nursery, his far less intelligent brother was writing *Loom of Youth* and since that time Mr Alec Waugh has never looked back – or would it be more correct to say, he has never looked forward?'

'I do not repine'– a saying that my grandfather and great-grandfather

used frequently. 'Comparisons are odious' – that was another.[4]

'He failed to break from beneath the heavy yoke of his forebears.' That is what will be said of me when I am gone and I shall not repine for that either. It is inevitable, just as they said of my father, or at least as one of his obituarists (who I think might have been called Gutteridge, or something similar) wrote of him: 'He never quite escaped the long shadow of his father, Evelyn Waugh. Consciously or unconsciously, he tried to emulate his celebrated parent, one of the 20th century's greatest comic novelists.' Of course, nobody is free from the influence of those who have brought them up and every son who has whiled his youth at his father's table subconsciously emulates him. Yes, we are all *formed* by the tastes of our parents. It is surely part of the charm of life that nobody starts from nowhere – but 'escape' and 'shadow'? What hidden emotion lies behind these words! Was Evelyn Waugh's 'shadow' (why not call it his 'radiating light'?) really such a terrible thing that his own son needed to flee it? Is it wise to flee the shadow of 'one of the 20th century's greatest comic novelists'? Do people 'consciously emulate' the shadows they are fleeing? I think not. Back to the drawing-board, Gutteridge.

> Oh, don't the days seem lank and long
> When all goes right and nothing goes wrong,
> And isn't your life extremely flat
> With nothing whatever to grumble at?

Papa often said that when he died he hoped either to be blown up

[4] 'Comparisons are odious' is a simple twisting of Shakespeare's 'Comparisons are odorous' from *Much Ado About Nothing*. My father and grandfather said it often but I have no idea who invented it. 'I do not repine' has been identified by Anthony Burgess and others as a personal cliché of Evelyn Waugh. He and his father may have used it often – too often – but they took it from Psmith, an early P. G. Wodehouse character. In 1935 my great-grandfather wrote to Wodehouse: 'There was a time in Alec's schooldays when we used to read your books together with enormous enjoyment; and, although we are never long enough together nowadays – to read more than a telegram – we have still preserved a sort of freemason's code of Psmithisms, which continually crop up in our letters. Indeed, I can truly say, in emulation of Wolfe, that I would rather have created Psmith than have stormed Quebec.'

by an atom bomb or to fade out on his bed at home, surrounded by groups of adoring family and friends. He succeeded in the latter. After a sudden dip in late December he found himself half-conscious on a hospital bed in Taunton. I shed no tears for him when he died because I had exhausted the supply in the run-up to that event. My brother and I had composed a stage musical that was being performed in London during December. 'If I should go during the run,' he told us, 'the show must go on.' I heard that Leonard Bernstein once lost his footing during a concert in New York, and as he fell backwards from the podium, clasping his baton in both hands, shouted, 'Carry on, guys!' to the orchestra. Papa fell seriously ill on the last night of *Bon Voyage!*. He had warned us and, to be frank, his decline was so rapid and debilitating that I was relieved when it was all over.

He looked pathetic lying on his hospital bed – a broken reed in stripy silk pyjamas. The man I had looked upon all my life as a fount of wisdom and civility, a pillar of strength, a paragon dad – even, in the last two years, as a friend – lay before me, in those bitter weeks, a thin, depressed, vulnerable shadow, a fragile desperado. His short-term memory had, for some reason to do with his blood circulation, ceased to function, and it was for this reason that he thought he was going mad. He wanted to die.

I sat by his bed each day, first at the hospital and later in his bedroom at Combe Florey. It was difficult to know what to say to him. I read passages from Sidney Smith, told him the day's news, tried to make a joke or two. He in turn made an enormous effort to show that he was amused and alert, but he wasn't. From the depths of our gloom many false notes were struck: we could put a lift into Combe Florey; he could retire from his work and enjoy drinking his way through the thousands of bottles of wine stored in his cellar; we could play croquet in the summer; find a publisher to produce a smart library edition of his works. 'Ah,' he said to that one, 'you mean build a Waugh factory?' But it was all hollow hopefulness since we both knew that, at most, only a few months were left to him. He was passing in and out of consciousness each half-hour and time was running thin.

We had the opportunity in those last solemn weeks to put our final points to each other. It was a chance – enviable to those whose

parents die suddenly and without warning – that perhaps I flunked. Our relationship was never perfect, but it was probably better than many; strong enough at any rate, I felt, to allow its embers to extinguish themselves naturally. People assume that the deathbed-side moment provides the perfect arena for exchanging ideas like 'I love you', forgiving ancient wrongs or eliciting from the dying some flattering or memorable quotation. Nothing of this kind occurred to me.

Like many English sons I had not kissed my father since I was twelve years old and had never said, 'I love you,' to him, even as a boy. Nor, for that matter, had he said anything like that to me and neither of us intended to break the taboos of our tribe for this occasion. The closest I came was during a visit to the hospital. When I arrived he was asleep so I scribbled a damp-eyed tribute on a small scrap of paper and dropped it into the mailbox at Reception for him to read when he awoke. His name was not on it and, anyway, I think I put it in the wrong box. Perhaps it was delivered to the perplexed old gaffer with an ingrowing toenail in the ward across the hall. I shall never know.

As far as I remember we never, in all our time together, had a single serious conversation. He had not trained me for it. In the last week there was a brief moment – not a conversation precisely but a few words of paternal advice: I must always be kind to Eliza (he adored her) and, something I already knew, that I was extremely lucky to have married her. He listed a few possessions that he wanted me to have after his death, but I was too rattled to remember what they were.

If Papa's autobiographical account is to be trusted, the news of his own father's death, on Easter Sunday 1966, came to him as a relief: 'Just as school holidays had been happier and more carefree when my father was away, so his death lifted a great brooding awareness not only from the house but from the whole of existence.' He was actually grateful to his father for going when he did. 'It is the duty of all good parents to die young,' he used to tell us. 'Nobody is completely grown up until both his parents are gone.' Samuel Butler believed that every son is given a new lease of life on the

death of his father.[5] This might well be true. In my own case, the new lease took a peculiar form: a search for identity or, to put it in other words, a disconcerting inflation of the egocentric element in my nature. 'What am I now that I wasn't then?' 'Where am I expected to stand in relation to his memory, to his work, to our family, to our surname?' 'Am I duty-bound to carry something on? If so, what is it?' From the mists of all these fatuous, unintelligible questions, a few bleary conclusions eventually showed themselves. Perhaps I had at least found a starting point.

It is a natural function of the evolutionary process (is it not?) that a man should desire a son in order to duplicate his own finest male qualities, to make a replica of himself that will take up his ideas, his prejudices, his humour, his attractive nose and his neatly curved bottom and pass them on, like a baton in a relay race, to generations of his descendants, as yet unborn. It is also a natural function of the evolutionary process (is it not?) that a boy should inherit (whether by mimicry or by the transfer of genes) many of the traits that are strongest and most useful to the continued fitness of his line.

As a small girl, my youngest daughter used to lean her head back and flicker her eyelids as she laughed, a distinctive gesture that I had only ever seen before in two people: her great-grandmother and her great-uncle. The great-uncle she had never met, the great-grandmother died before she was born. If she thought she was expressing her individuality by laughing in this unusual way, she was wrong. It made me wonder what evolutionary purpose this quaint mannerism could possibly serve but also if there is any such thing as a genuine expression of individuality.

I do not wish to diminish the role of mothers, sisters, great-aunts, school-teachers or anyone else with claims to influence the individuals around them, but this book is not about them. It is only about fathers and sons. It is also my specific intention to allow the

[5] Of his own father Butler wrote: 'He never liked me, nor I him; from my earliest recollections I can recall no time when I did not fear and dislike him. Over and over again I relented towards him and said to myself that he was a good fellow after all; but I had hardly done so when he would go for me in some way or other which soured me again.'

principal characters to tell the story as much as possible in their own words. As professional writers, they were all gifted with great powers of expression. I can assure you they will not let us down.

If any other family has preserved such a diverse, comprehensive and intimate archive of material relating to fathers and sons I would be amazed to hear of it, but at present I believe the Waughs to be, in this respect, unique. My story starts in the late 1860s with my great-great-grandfather, a disagreeable Dr Waugh, with a sadistic attitude to his sons. It ends – or, should I say, it is abandoned with a short open letter to my son in the sixth generation: a modest smidgen of fatherly advice.

Papa surprised me once by describing people who do not wish to know anything about their ancestors as 'evil', a strong word for him: 'incurious', a little 'stupid', perhaps? I have often wondered what he meant by this and why he used such an uncharacteristically violent word.

When he caught me meditating once on the frailties and strengths of my own personality, Papa shook his fist through the door of my bedroom and accused me from without of 'wafting odious clouds of self-think'. The opprobrium was well deserved. Both my parents railed often against the dangers of self-think. We were taught, all of us, to despise it. The Delphic oracle that once proclaimed, 'O Man, know thyself,' must have been an idiot, for there is no difference between this ancient 'wisdom' and the abominable teenage egotism of 'I need to discover the real me.' Perhaps 'O Man, know thine ancestors' would be a more useful motto for the modern egotist to pin on his puffed lapel. For the key to his identity, if such a thing even exists, will be found to lie not where he instinctively looks for it in the mirror-glass in front, but furtively concealed all about the hedgerows and borders of the long, twisting, dusty road behind.