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If I Don't Write It Nobody Else Will

Eric Sykes

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Extract

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UNDER STARTER'S ORDERS

On 4 May 1923 I was born, but in giving me life my mother sacrificed her own. Officially recorded as 'Harriet Sykes, née Stacey, died in childbirth', cold, clinical and final: cold and clinical yes, but final? We shall see. Although my mother had departed this life, she hadn't abandoned me. I know this to be true, from instances in my life too numerous to be passed off as mere coincidence, in fact some so inexplicable, so impossible, that they can only be described as miracles. As for my poor father, one can hardly imagine the depth of his despair, the rising panic as his whole world collapsed around him – his beloved Harriet in exchange for this red-faced wrinkled intruder. How was he to manage? He already had a two-year-old son, Vernon, and, good grief, at the time Father was only twenty-three years old, an ex-sergeant in the occupation forces in Germany and now, in this land fit for heroes, a lowly labourer in a cotton mill, which in those early post-war years was no more than being a white slave, the manacles being the need to eat.

Counsellors had yet to be invented, social workers didn't exist and the Citizens Advice Bureau was not even in the pipeline; but on the plus side, people cared more, and neighbours and anyone else who knew of the tragedy at 36 Leslie Street, Oldham, offered not only their condolences but, more to the point, food, and cast-off clothing; and apparently one old lady offered a kitten. It was heart-warming but it didn't solve the problem. Before long the cavalry arrived, as my distraught father knew they would, his parents, Granddad and Grandma Sykes, and my late mother's family, the Staceys, were not far behind.

It must have been a very sombre get-together. What was to be

done? Most likely I was asleep at the time, so I can only surmise what happened next. Grandma Stacey was to take Vernon – after all, he was two years old and house-trained – but she refused point blank to take me as well. I discovered many years later that Grandma Stacey had been against the marriage in the first place, and Father was *persona non grata* in her house. However Mother used to visit regularly with her small son Vernon and ergo he was the only memory of their daughter Harriet had left them, whereas in their eyes I was partly responsible for the loss, and in truth I probably was.

What then should be done with me? My father couldn't take me with him to the cotton mill every morning and crèches were unheard of in those days. However after a time a solution was found. I was to be deposited with a kind spinster called Miss Redfern who lived in Davies Street, or it may have been Miss Davies of Redfern Street – I didn't keep a diary in those days. I'm now in my eighties and I still haven't got round to it.

Of the two years of my displacement I have only vague memories, of my surrogate mother's house: the smell of furniture polish, and above my cot a huge parrot that squawked incessantly from the time the black cloth was taken off the cage until it was mercifully covered up again at bedtime. It was my constant companion until eventually I was returned to the custody of my father at 36 Leslie Street, much less salubrious, with no smell of furniture polish (we didn't have enough furniture to warrant the extravagance), but at least it was home. In later years my father told me that neither he nor anyone else could understand what I was babbling about. Hardly surprising, as I'd never learned English, but spoke fluent parrot. At two years old I was incontinent, and still unsteady on my pins, because learning to walk too early was not encouraged in case it led to rickets.

Cataclysmic changes had taken place during my absence at Redfern/Davies's. My father had married again and already I wasn't the youngest in the family: I had a little brother, John. He was still only at the sleeping and eating stage of development, but already I'd taken to him. It was the beginning of a close, warm-hearted friendship that was to last a lifetime. Apparently I hovered round

his cot most of the day, impatient for him to grow up so that we could play together. When John was twelve months old or thereabouts we'd hold conversations. I would come out with something and when I'd finished he'd wait for a moment or two before the penny dropped that it was his turn to speak, and when he obviously couldn't he'd gurgle, splutter and blow raspberries, making both of us laugh with sheer joy. It must have been the first time in my life that I laughed – the parrot must have found me a very dull ha'p'orth.

Two or three years later John was growing into a beautiful little boy, and one of the highlights for me was John's bedtime. Mother cradled him in her arms, then, sitting herself down in the rocking chair, she would begin singing. Softly she sang a hymn, the same one every time, but she didn't sing the words. It was 'bee bough, bee bough, bee bough, bee bough', each word synchronised to each rock, and a gentle patting in the same tempo; she 'bee boughed' in an absent-minded voice, staring into space as if I wasn't there. I don't think I was jealous, envious, or left out. It never even occurred to me that no one had ever sung me to sleep, embraced me or kissed me; I accepted as a natural progression that in our house I was last in the pecking order, and strangely enough it didn't bother me at all. Although I was unaware of it at the time, being a non-playing lodger relieved me from all responsibility and I was free to live in the fantasy world in my head, which transcended the hopelessness of the surrounding poverty and deprivation that typified most cotton towns in the late 1920s. Incidentally the hymn that Mother 'bee boughed' I discovered years afterwards was 'O God, our help in ages past'.

Another little incident occurred some months later. Vernon was not with us and John and I were still a-bed. I wasn't asleep; I'd just heard the front door close as Dad set off for work. Some minutes afterwards, Mother came into our bedroom, clambered over me and lay between us for a moment. Then she turned on her side to cuddle John. The sight of Mother's back was as if I'd had a door

slammed in my face. A few moments went by, and I had an overwhelming urge to put my arm around her, but I was too shy, so I turned my back on her and worried about my pet tortoise, which had been missing for several days. Perhaps I had no need to worry: Dad had reassured me that tortoises hibernated, then, realising that he'd lost me with the word 'hibernate', he explained to me that my tortoise had stolen away to a safe place in order to sleep through the winter. Half mollified, I accepted his explanation, although it never occurred to me at the time that it wasn't yet July. I must have dozed, because when I opened my eyes again Mother had gone and so had John, and I then began to wonder if I'd dreamed about her turning her back on me to cuddle him. I was much too young to understand my silent cry for help, my desperate yearning to belong, to be acknowledged – even a smile would have sufficed.

I must have been about six when I woke up one cold autumn morning feeling different. Somewhere at the back of my mind a hazy thought began to take shape. I had the stub of a pencil somewhere and I could buy a small notebook from the little shop on Ward Street. Then I forgot what these preparations were for, but then suddenly it all clicked into place. It was a brilliant idea: I was going to take down motor-car numbers, and I wouldn't tell anybody about it because if I did they'd all be at it. I couldn't wait to get started. Bolting down only half a Shredded Wheat, I dashed upstairs for the stub of pencil, down again, and then out of the door as if the house was on fire, stopping at the corner shop to buy a small notebook, which cost a penny (incidentally my entire fortune), and in less than five minutes I was sitting on the edge of the pavement. No one ever referred to the pavement: they were 't'flags', and the street or thoroughfare was 't'cart road', and so from the shop I ran down to Featherstall Road and sat on 't'flags' with my feet in 't'cart road'. Once settled, I opened my little notebook, pencil poised for action – so far so good. My head swivelled from side to side in case I missed a number and I made a mental note that when I'd collected fifty numbers it would be enough.

I wasn't being over-optimistic: after all, this was the main highway from Rochdale to Manchester. However, time passed and I reluctantly reduced my original aim of fifty motor-car numbers to twenty. It was coming up to dinnertime and now the cold, gusty wind was beginning to dampen my enthusiasm. I shivered, but sat on, book held stoically in one hand, pencil not quite so poised. I decided to abandon the enterprise if a motor car didn't appear before the next tram . . . Three trams later there was one coal cart, wearily pulled by a dozing horse, reins loosely held by a sleeping driver; sometime later a large cart coming the other way, carrying enormous barrels, the heavy load drawn by two off-white, huge beasts, trotting proudly on big hairy feet. Turning my head to the right, I disinterestedly watched yet another tram wrenching itself round the corner from Oldham Road into Featherstall Road to rattle and grind its way down the single track to the loop, where it stopped to allow an 'up-tram' to pass in order to join the one track to Royton, and from there made a sharp turn right to Shaw Wrens Nest or to carry on to Rochdale. But alas, there was not a motor car for miles. Pencil, notebook and hands now deep in jacket pockets, feet drumming against the road to coax a bit of warmth back into them, I must have looked a picture of abject misery, and hungry with it, when a voice behind and above me broke into my self-imposed despondency. ''Allo, 'allo, 'allo,' and I recognised the brogue of our local bobby or, to give him his full title, Constable Matty Lally. He was an imposing figure of a man, built like a full-grown water buffalo, which gave a great sense of security to the law-abiding and made him a fearful presence in the darker side of the community.

'What are you doing there, lad?' he said. 'I've had my eye on you for the last half hour.'

'I'm collecting motor-car numbers,' I said, as if I'd been directed to do a survey.

He shook his head sadly. 'You'll get piles sitting there,' he said, and moved himself off.

As I watched him go, the import of his words hit me. When Matty Lally spoke, everybody listened, and hadn't he just told me

I'd get piles? I assumed that he meant that piles of motor cars would be along any minute and my enthusiasm returned. So I renewed my vigilance, having finally decided that one motor car would be enough. How was I, six or seven years old, to know that Matty Lally had been referring to a nasty bottom problem and not piles of motor cars?

However, the enterprise was not a write-off. As I was about to leave, a ramshackle boneshaker turned the corner and trundled towards me. It was moving so slowly that I was able to walk alongside it while taking the number, BU something or other – I forget now, but it's not important.

We lads who lived in Leslie Street considered ourselves fortunate in having the Mucky Broos right outside our front doors. 'Broos' were small hills, and these were 'Mucky' because they were just a large expanse of dirt; rare blades of sickly grass struggled to exist and even though the rain was frequent, the soil was worked out – even weeds preferred to take their chances in the cracks on the pavement. Most days the Mucky Broos were just two acres of slippery, glutinous mud, but they had dry periods as well. The area was triangular in shape, bordered at the top end by Ward Street Central School and on the other side by Ward Street itself, with Leslie Street the base of the triangle. Not very inspiring, but the Mucky Broos were our playground. My best mate was Richard Branwood, whose little sister Martha was used when required in a supporting role.

On one occasion we dug a trench and, with poles for rifles, re-enacted the Battle of the Somme. A couple more lads joined us as we leapt out of the trench and then charged towards the imaginary Germans, only to retreat and sprawl on the ground to have our wounds attended to. Martha, the little sister of mercy, knelt by me, stroking my forehead gently, a sad smile on her face. I liked this bit: it left me with a pleasant, warm feeling that I'd never experienced before, and I couldn't wait to be wounded again when we repeated the whole process. It was exciting, but after a few more

sorties we all wanted to be dead, so we all lay spreadeagled in the dirt, exhausted. After a time I raised my head and discovered that it was not only getting dark but Richard and the other lads had gone and, more importantly, so had the nursing staff, so I went as well.

However, that wasn't the end of the matter. The following morning an irate neighbour called at our house and demanded we fill the trench in, as it was a danger to man and beast. He claimed that on his way home last night he'd fallen in, and he rolled up his trouser leg to show my father a nasty graze. Dad sucked in his breath and sent me off to fill in the trench.

Reluctantly I did as I was told. No more mock battles of the Somme, no more charging over the top – but if the truth were known, what I would miss most of all would be the little nurse with the sad smile stroking my forehead. It was the first time in my young life that anyone had shown me tenderness, awakening emotions in me beyond my understanding but taken for granted by most children.

Fortunately my cup was always half full and never half empty, so in five minutes I had forgotten all about the Somme and I was galloping over the dips and hollows of Texas, pointing my two fingers like six shooters and cleaning up the bad lands. On another day with some of the lads, off-white hankies tucked into the backs of our caps to shield our necks from the pitiless sun, although there wasn't much of that in Lancashire, we were in the French Foreign Legion and with poles over our shoulders we marched over the burning sands – to us the sands were burning whatever the weather. When we had tired of the desert, we had lots of other pursuits. One of my favourite games was Ducky Funny Whip. How it got this name is a mystery, but we certainly didn't make it up. A 'ducky' is a smooth stone, and there were plenty of them scattered about the Mucky Broos. We each picked one out; the size was immaterial, provided you were strong enough to throw it. Having each found our own ducky, we stood in a queue while whoever was 'It' placed half bricks on top of one another to about three feet high, finally putting his own ducky on top. Then the game commenced. One by one we hurled our duckies to try to knock the column of bricks

over. When a lucky throw brought the target down, we all picked up our duckies and ran away to hide amongst the dips and slight rises of our Mucky Broos. When 'It' had rebuilt his pile of bricks and put his ducky on top, he endeavoured to find someone, and when he did he tapped them and ran back to his column of bricks and cocked his leg over it, and he wasn't 'It' any more. However, if the unfortunate who'd been spotted managed to beat 'It' back to the target and knock the column down before 'It' could cock his leg over it, everyone ran away to hide again and the process continued. Older people will understand and forgive the dog's breakfast I've made in trying to explain what was, in fact, a very simple pastime, not as mentally challenging as chess but to us urchins infinitely more enjoyable. Ducky Funny Whip was a team game best played when the nights were drawing in, as lying in the shadows made it more difficult for 'It'.

Dad and most other working men hated Mondays, and looked forward to Friday night and a wage packet; above all Friday was the gateway to the greener grass of the weekend. Naturally young children had a different aspect to the week; we fought to keep heavy eyes open as bedtime approached, because that would end another day, but every morning was a new adventure. However, as for the grown-ups Friday night was our favourite, as for John and me it was our bath night.

First the rumbling in the backyard as Dad lifted the tin bath from the nail on the wall, staggering through the door with it on his back like a tortoise from outer space while Mother closed the door behind him to keep out the cold. There is nothing so soothing and delicious as a warm soapy bath in front of a blazing fire and even when soap got into our eyes it was a small price to pay for this weekly luxury. Once we were out of the bath, everything was warm – the towels, the milk – and best of all we felt clean and shiny. Roll on next Friday. If only we could carry these moments of happiness and contentment into adulthood.

Another pal of mine was John Broome, and when I was a little older his mother kindly gave me an overcoat, grey and much too large. When I wore it, only the top of my head and my feet were

visible, but it kept me warm through two winters, when it finally fell to pieces before it could be handed down again.

It was an unwritten law that to qualify for use of the Mucky Broos one either lived in Ward Street or Leslie Street. We regarded it as our private and exclusive play area, and as far as I can remember no stranger ever played there or attempted to take it from us, which is hardly surprising, really, as there were thousands of Mucky Broos in Oldham and ours was well down the list of much sought-after properties. We played cricket in the summer with a pile of coats for the wicket and football in the winter with two piles of coats for the goalposts; an old tennis ball sufficed for both sports. In the soft summer evenings quite a few people in Ward Street sat out on chairs watching our games; folks who lived on Leslie Street stood in the doorways, as they didn't have the advantage of a pavement on which to place their chairs. For them it was only dirt but to us lads they were an appreciative audience and they spurred us on to ludicrous heights, and we played whatever game we were into with extra panache. We lads were all mentally in an England shirt and the couple of dozen watchers were a packed Wembley.

When it was completely dark, we wandered over to Ward Street for another of our distractions. Whoever was 'It' faced the wall of a house and shouted "M-I-L-K, MILK" and at the same time we advanced slowly towards him from across the street. A clever 'It' would start slowly with 'M' and then rush 'I-L-K', whirling round, and anybody caught moving took his place. This game was illuminated by the light from the toffee-shop window, a shop which never seemed to close in case somebody wanted a box of matches or a jar of pickles or even toffees. When we had money we were in the shop like a flash, with a coin on the counter and asking for a ha'p'orth of 'all round-the-window', which meant that the lady took a toffee from each of the boxes on display. When the lamplighter approached with his long pole to touch the gas mantle in the lamp opposite we had added illumination. The game continued until Mother's high-pitched voice called into the darkness, 'Eriiiiic', and sadly that was the end of my night's entertainment.

Of course it wasn't all play. I had my day job helping to lay the

table and sometimes drying a plate during the washing-up, but my most important assignment of all was being responsible for cutting old newspapers into squares to hang on a nail in the lavatory at the bottom of the garden.

I can't remember John ever taking part in our rough and tumbles on the Mucky Broos. Although he was now old enough, Mother wanted to keep an eye on him and I was quite happy with this arrangement. After all, John was the centre of her universe and, much as I enjoyed his company indoors, during our games I was glad to be relieved of the responsibility of looking after him. I couldn't anyway as I was too busy enjoying myself.

Some Saturday mornings Mother gave us tuppence each to go to the Imperial, the picture house better known as 'the Fleapit'. It wasn't too far away, on Featherstall Road, almost opposite my numberplate collection station. She gave us tuppence so that we could afford the best seats and wouldn't have to mix with the scruffbags in the penny seats. John and I had other ideas: we didn't mind sitting with the 'untouchables' so that we had the other penny to spend on toffees.

There was always a cacophony of noise before the programme started, whistles and laughter, and scallywags running up and down the aisles, but the babble dwindled quickly when the lights went down. Usually there was a serial every Saturday morning. The most scary one I remember was called *The Shadow*. Two men were talking together or, to be more accurate, miming talking together – what they were discussing was written at the bottom of the picture. Then suddenly the music went into low menacing phrases. It wasn't really an orchestra but a woman at the piano in the pit, and as she pounded out a crescendo the shadow of a hooded person crept along the wall towards the two men. This was nail-biting stuff. We all knew what was going to happen, but nobody closed their mouth. Slowly the shadow raised an arm, holding the shadow of a weapon, to bring it crashing down on the head of the nearest man, who collapsed immediately. His colleague whirled round, drew his pistol

and fired at the shadow, which was useless, it seemed, because the shadow, completely oblivious, sidled off the screen. There were, of course, no sounds of gun shots – after all, most films were silent in those days – but the lady pianist was working herself into a frenzy to build up to the 'to be continued next week'. The lights went on again before the next effort, but conversation was now subdued as *The Shadow* was discussed.

Sometimes the serial was followed by a comedy, but romance was anathema to us and a couple kissing was greeted with whistles, boos and showers of orange peel being hurled at the screen until the lights went up and the manager walked on stage and immediately we were subdued. He had a rough voice and he threatened us all with expulsion if we didn't behave. Meanwhile the film was still running, partly behind him on the silver screen but mostly on him as he spoke, and by the time he left the stage the offending scene was well past, or at least indecipherable until the lights went down and the lady pianist began again with sloppy arpeggios. Romantic films weren't often shown but whenever there was a kissing sequence it invariably provoked this situation. Sometimes I felt sorry for the manager: he probably had to show what he was given, films that a decent cinema would reject out of hand. But we still looked forward to the next Saturday morning.

Already I am now seven years old and still haven't decided what my career is going to be, although grown-ups always seem to ask me what am I going to be when I grow up. In truth, I haven't given it a thought – I have enough problems enjoying my childhood.

Wakes Week in the cotton towns of Lancashire was the annual holiday. These holidays were staggered – for instance, Royton's Wakes followed Oldham Wakes, and Rochdale's Wakes came after Royton's and so on, the reason for staggering obviously being so that only one town would be closed down at a time and Lancashire's cotton production would continue with hardly a hiccup.

Naturally we all looked forward to Oldham's Wakes. A travelling fair visited Oldham for the week, and the stalls of Tommyfield market were removed and replaced by the fair. The biggest attractions were the roundabouts, with prancing horses moving up and down under garish lights as they whirled round the mechanical orchestra belting out brassy cymbalised melodies; screams and laughter from the dodgems; coconut shies; hoopla stalls; roll a penny. There was usually a boxing booth, outside which two tough, battered characters dressed for the boxing ring stood on a raised platform with their arms folded. Next to them, only half their size but twice their IQ, the barker spoke through a megaphone, announcing that any contender lasting three rounds with either of his roughnecks would receive a pound. Many a brave lad accepted the challenge, and took off his shirt and vest to have his boxing gloves laced while the crowds bustled in to surround the ring. When the place was full, the barker fastened the tent flap and climbed through the ropes to announce the first bout. I was too young to go into the booth, but I asked Dad what went on inside. He shuddered and told me that few of the young hopefuls survived even into round two: most of them, blood-spattered with shocked eyes, were helped from the ring by their mates, and others, more prudent, chickened out before they had a chance of stardom. Dad swore that he would never set foot in a boxing booth again. He said it was a human abattoir and just to watch left him feeling sick and debased. All that remained in my mind was what is an abattoir?

One Wakes Week Dad had an exciting surprise for us. He told us that we were going to Blackpool for four days. To say we were delighted would be putting it mildly. For us Blackpool was our Shangri-La, our fairyland wherein it was Wakes all the year round.

John and I had never been on a train before, so having a compartment to ourselves on the Blackpool train didn't register until Dad said he thought it would have been crowded during Wakes Week. Mother and Dad sat opposite each other by the window but we didn't sit anywhere as we were too excited to be still. There were so many things to see: hedgerows whizzing past, meadows

dotted with cows intent on cropping the grass, some raising their heads to glance curiously at the train, a black horse in the next field; and in the split second it took to vanish behind us we searched frantically for a white one, which was worth a toffee in one of our competitions that made the journey more exciting, as if we needed more excitement.

Then my father bent towards us and pointed to the horizon, and together we screamed, 'Blackpool Tower.' This was the highlight of our journey and we staggered and lurched on to the seats as we began to slow down and soon the train huffed importantly into Blackpool Central station. We were overawed by the sheer immensity of this austere Victorian building, with arches high above the concourse and hurrying passengers alighting from the train. It had never entered my head that there were others besides us making their way to Blackpool, so wrapped up were we in wonder in our own private compartment. As we passed the engine driver, Dad said, 'Thank you', and the engine driver, leaning out of his cab and wiping his hands on an oily rag, nodded and winked at John and me, while behind the engine driver a huge sweating man in a singlet, shovelled coal to feed the insatiable appetite of the boiler, his face lit by the glow. I backed out of the station, my eyes never leaving the old train driver enjoying his pipe, and I decided there and then that one day I would drive the Blackpool train.

Dad determined to take us along the promenade so that we could get a closer look at the fabulous tower, but unfortunately as we turned into the Golden Mile we were targeted by the screaming wind, which made progress almost impossible as we made our way to the boarding house. The waves were hurling themselves at the sea walls, flinging white spray into the air that was gleefully accepted by the wind and helped across the road to drench anybody stupid enough to be out on a day like this.

Without hesitation, Dad lifted John into his arms and Mother grasped my hand, and we all staggered into the shelter of the nearest side street. The calm and peace not ten yards from the frantic onslaught of the wind and sea were unnerving. As Dad wiped John's face with his hankie, a policeman strolled across to us.

'Been swimming?' he enquired sarcastically.

Dad puffed out his cheeks and replied, 'It's a force-ten gale out there.'

The policeman shook his head. 'Bit of a blow, that's all. It'll be all right tomorrow.'

Well, he was certainly correct in his weather forecast. On the morrow there was no wind to speak of, just the odd gust; but it was quite cold – 'bracing', the landlady said. So John and I paddled in the pools by the sea wall left by the receding tide. Mother kept a watchful eye on us while Dad took a tram to a place called Uncle Tom's Cabin to see if any of his mates were there. This was a favourite watering hole and he may well have met someone he knew: after all, it was Oldham's Wakes Week and visitors to Blackpool would most likely be Oldhamers.

The next day Mother took us down to the Pleasure Ground on the south shore. This was ten times bigger and more awesome than the travelling fairground that toured the Lancashire cotton towns. John and I rolled a penny each down the slots but won nothing, and Mother yanked us away before we got the bug. We had a ride on the prancing horses in between eating candy floss – we didn't eat any supper when we got home and in fact during that visit we ate enough candy floss between us to stuff a medium-sized mattress. Dad spent the day at Uncle Tom's Cabin and so we only saw him long enough to say, 'Bye, Dad.'

On the Wednesday Mother took us by tram to Bispham and I had the feeling that if it hadn't been too expensive we would have gone as far as Fleetwood, where Dad said you could get the best kippers in the world. Incidentally he wasn't with us, as he spent the day at Uncle Tom's Cabin again. On the last day it absolutely threw it down – the rain was unbelievable – and against the rules of the boarding house we were allowed to stay indoors and play draughts and snakes and ladders. We would have played ludo, only we needed four players and Dad wasn't present as he was at Uncle Tom's Cabin. By and large we had a marvellous holiday. Even Dad was over the moon, as he'd won a shilling at darts in Uncle Tom's Cabin. And so our wonderful few days by the sea came to an end,

and now my ambition was to be a train driver on the promenade at Blackpool.

One Sunday Mother got John and me ready and told us that we were going to Grandma Stacey's for tea. It was the first I'd heard of Grandma Stacey, but in those days little boys didn't ask silly questions like 'Who's Grandma Stacey?' We took the tram to a much posher part of Oldham, a world we'd never seen, and I remember thinking that the further we travelled the more austere our surroundings were. When we finally arrived at our destination, I was overawed by the quiet, aloof elegance of the Victorian terraces. We were aliens in a land of privilege as we walked furtively uphill to the address of Grandma Stacey.

The front door was opened by an old lady whose bottom jaw trembled as if she was cold, with a long black dress ornamented only by a cameo brooch at her throat and hair swept up at the back and held tightly in place by a large comb. This turned out to be Great-grandma Wilson. She didn't speak, even after Mother's 'Good afternoon'; she just opened the door wider, turned and floated along the passage, to disappear in a room, and after a moment she reappeared and looked at us, whereupon Mother ushered us forward and we went into a more cheerful atmosphere.

A fire was burning brightly in the grate and an old man in a pillbox hat with a tassel was seesawing slowly back and forward in a rocking chair, busily puffing on a white clay pipe, which had a lid on it, his eyes never leaving the burning coals. We three stood around, hardly breathing in case he turned to look in our direction. In front of us there was a table covered by a startlingly white cloth and on it a small plateful of sandwiches and three bowls of prunes. Then the little old lady with the quivering jaw entered with a jug full of hot custard and poured it over the prunes, after which she made a silent exit and we never saw her again on that visit; nor did the old man in the rocking chair interrupt his quiet vigil over the fire. When we'd finished we stood around in silence, which was oppressive and broken only by the hissing and spluttering of the

fire and, more dominating, the sonorous ticking of an old polished grandfather clock sneering down at us. Mother said, 'Well, er . . . we'll be off then,' and glared at us until in unison we said, 'Thank you for my tea,' and that was the end of the ordeal.

On the tram going home Mother told us that the old lady was not Grandma Stacey: she was not at home today, and neither was my brother Vernon. The old couple we'd met were Grandma Stacey's parents, Great-grandpa and Great-grandma Wilson. She also explained why they didn't speak: it was simply because they were both in their nineties. I must confess that this remark had me puzzled for days. If you were over ninety, were you not allowed to speak? Or, more worryingly, perhaps at that impossible age they'd forgotten how it was done.

Subsequently we went to tea for three more Sundays. On the last visit I think Mother must have taken John to the lavatory for I was left alone with Great-grandpa Wilson, still rocking, still puffing and glaring at the fire. I just stood and watched him. I was good at standing and watching – I'd had enough practice at home. Then Great-grandpa Wilson took the pipe out of his mouth and the old man I'd previously thought incapable of speech broke his silence, but it was as if I wasn't there – I'd had enough practice at that as well. Taking the pipe out of his mouth, he said, 'Last night she didn't come home till after nine o'clock.' He put his pipe back in his mouth, puffed for a while, took it out again and said, 'I reckon she's got a fancy man somewhere,' and that was the end of what could scarcely be described as a conversation – in fact I wouldn't have dared open my mouth. I just stood and watched, and his stare never left the fire. Many, many years later, when I was working for my living, Great-grandpa Wilson's words came back to me, and with a flash of insight I realised that he had been referring to Grandma Stacey, who was seventy-two at the time; and on mulling over those awful prunes-and-custard ordeals I realised that Great-grandpa Wilson must have been born in about 1836. What a wealth of memories must have been staring back at him from the fire! Victoria was Queen when he was young, but did Great-grandpa Wilson know this? After all, there was no such thing as a wireless

in those far-off days; he would have been middle-aged before it had been invented. He must have been aware that Prince Albert, Victoria's consort, was German, but when Albert died an early death and the whole country mourned, how would Great-grandpa Wilson have learned of this tragic event? There were few newspapers and probably none at all in Oldham, which in those days was mostly forest and grassland, and certainly there were no newsagents. Perhaps information was conveyed by the town crier, but then would Oldham have been big enough to warrant such a luxury, and how did the town crier get the news in the first place? Questions, questions, questions. In the middle of the nineteenth century there were no such 'get-abouts' as the motor car, trams were yet to come, and there would have been no roads for them to travel on; horses and coaches were the only means of transport and then only for the gentry. To be abroad at night when there were no lights to illuminate the paths was to make oneself vulnerable to rogues and vagabonds. What a rich tapestry of first-hand knowledge stared back at Grandpa Wilson from the fire! I would have sat at his feet just to listen, anything, yet the only time he spoke to me was to slag off Grandma Stacey, his seventy-two-year-old daughter who hadn't come home till after nine o'clock. What was he afraid of – a highwayman? Oh, what a missed opportunity!

The next time I saw Great-grandpa Wilson was when Grandma Stacey took me by the hand and led me into a quiet bedroom to pay my respects to him as he lay peacefully in his coffin. Other people whom I'd never met stood around in quiet groups, but no one seemed particularly upset. When Grandma Stacey took me back downstairs, a different drama was taking place. I was fascinated as I watched one of the mourners – a large, untidy man in a bowler hat, with a large pointed nose with a large dewdrop hanging on the end of it reluctant to leave home – rummaging in the shelves of a magnificent bookcase, occasionally stuffing his pockets with anything that took his fancy. It later turned out that he was one of the uncles – so my father told me about a week after the funeral. Staring into the fire he said bitterly, 'Your Great-grandpa Wilson promised me the harmonium.' As there were only the two of us present,

I assumed he was addressing me. After a time he went on, 'Your Uncle Albert pinched it,' and, as if to clinch his case, he added, 'He was seen pushing a hand cart up Waterloo Street and that harmonium was roped on to it.' I remember thinking, 'Thank God for Uncle Albert': the last thing we needed at our house was a harmonium, and Dad struggling to play every night when he came home from work, his feet going up and down on the treadles like a demented cyclist on an exercise bike, his head bowed over a sheet of music he couldn't understand.

Some days later Dad's words came back to me. 'He promised me the harmonium', he'd said, and he'd stressed the word 'me' as if he was entitled to it, but to my knowledge he'd never met the Wilsons or Grandma Stacey; nor did he accompany us for our prunes and custard. More importantly, he hadn't gone with me to look at Great-grandpa Wilson in his coffin. So why should the old man promise him the harmonium? I gave up there, and I still didn't know who Grandma Stacey, Great-grandpa Wilson and Great-grandma Wilson belonged to.

Children when I was young were generally predictable. For instance, if we were walking sedately anywhere with a solemn expression on our faces it would be almost certain that we were on our way to school, church or the doctor – in other words a destination that was mundane, dutiful, boring or simply somewhere we weren't keen to arrive at; but if our target was pleasurable, we ran, and we enjoyed the run, full of excited, pleasant thoughts of where we were going.

So it was with John and me every Tuesday during the summer holidays, when Grandma Ashton baked bread and muffins. From home to Royton seemed to us like miles, and for little legs it was, but we ran all the way, up Featherstall Road, turning left at the Queens, along Oldham Road past Boundary Park Hospital and Sheep's Foot Lane, which led down to the workhouse next to the lunatic asylum and Boundary Park, the home ground of Oldham Athletic Football Club. We were now halfway to Houghton Street, where the Ashtons lived at the foot of Oldham Edge. As we turned into Houghton Street we could smell the warm loaves and muffins,

which gave us a fillip for the last fifty yards. Breathless and flushed, we raced through the open door, John to fling his arms around the knees of Grandma Ashton, who held her arms wide so as not to embrace him in her flour-caked arms.

Grandma Ashton wasn't thin and austere like Grandma Stacey but dumpy and warm, always with a tired smile on her face, wearied by years of caring, feeding and bringing up her daughters, Auntie Emmy, Auntie Edna and of course our mother, Florrie. Her only son, Stanley, had been killed at Mons during the Great War and I don't think he had been twenty years old. Grandma Ashton was the rock upon which the whole family depended. Granddad Ashton always seemed to be sitting by the fireplace, even in summer, and like Great-grandpa Wilson, staring into the glowing coals, a lopsided grin on his face.

The fireplace was the focal point of most households then, and even some of the poorest managed to find coal. During the winter our mother and father sat on each side of the grate, us children standing, the gas mantle flickering behind us as the wind whistled malevolently through the keyhole of the back door. Sadly in the present day the fire has been replaced by central heating, paradoxically warm yet heartless, and the fireplace is no longer the focal point of a room. Again regretfully families now sit grouped round the television set and this modern world is no better for the change. In the burning coals you could see whatever picture you wished, but from a television you only get what you are given.

Now I've got that off my chest, back to Grandma Ashton's. Whenever she baked, there was always a small lump of dough for John and me, which we shaped into little men; currants for buttons and eyes, then into the oven with them. I really looked forward to going to Grandma Ashton's. It was fun, especially once when John and I stayed the night. It was a great adventure, sleeping in a strange bed, and when the night lightened into morning we were yacketing excitedly together when the door opened and Auntie Emmy and Auntie Edna, still in their nighties, sprang into the room, Auntie Edna wielding a sabre. We dived under the covers, shivering with

fright, and screaming for Auntie Edna to spare us, while Auntie Emmy was laughing fit to bust.

The memory of that sabre has always fascinated me. I took for granted that it had once been issued to Granddad Ashton. It was the weapon of cavalry; ergo Granddad Ashton in his youth fought his battles on horseback – that is, if he had ever seen action. Perhaps he had been too young for the Charge of the Light Brigade, but surely he must have been in some other battle. Come to think of it, I never ever heard him say anything. In any case, I wasn't old enough to think of a question.

Apart from John, the only other person I'd ever really taken to was Auntie Emmy. She always looked upon me with kindness and understanding. Whenever I visited the Ashtons with John, Auntie Emmy invariably greeted me with a warm smile, as if we were two conspirators with a hidden agenda, although such a highfallutin philosophy never entered my head, let alone crossed my mind. Auntie Emmy must have known about my real mother's death; in fact everyone was in the know – except me. I was a rowing boat adrift on a foggy night in the busy shipping lanes of the channel. Perhaps that is why she took a special interest in me, though not, I must add, out of pity, and the rapport between us was genuine.

On one occasion when I had a raging toothache it was Auntie Emmy who took me to the dentist, an old man who must have gained his degree in the nineteenth century when possibly the only dental appliance was a pair of pliers. His surgery was the front room of his house, lit only by two gas mantles. He wore an old cardigan and a shirt fastened at the neck by a stud but with no collar.

Pushing his glasses on to his forehead, he gazed short-sightedly into my mouth. 'Which one is it?' he asked.

I looked across at Auntie Emmy.

'You have to show him,' she said helpfully.

I was at a loss for a moment. For most people visiting the dentist the toothache seems to disappear the moment they step over the threshold, and so it was with me, and I was afraid that I might point out the wrong one.