VINTAGE

MEMOIRS

KINGSLEY AMIS

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About the Book

Elegant, provocative and hugely entertaining, Kingsley Amis’s memoirs are filled with anecdotes, experiences and portraits of famous friends, family, acquaintances (and a few eminent foes). From his childhood days to Oxford and army life, his travels abroad and his years as a successful novelist, *Memoirs* offers extraordinary insights into a unique literary life.

About the Author

Kingsley Amis was born in South London in 1922 and was educated at the City of London School and St John's College, Oxford. After the publication of *Lucky Jim* in 1954, Kingsley Amis wrote over twenty novels, including *The Alteration*, winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, *The Old Devils*, winner of the Booker Prize in 1986, and *The Biographer's Moustache*, which was to be his last book. He also wrote on politics, education, language, films, television, restaurants and drink. Kingsley Amis was awarded the CBE in 1981 and received a knighthood in 1990. He died in October 1995.

ALSO BY KINGSLEY AMIS

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Lucky Jim
That Uncertain Feeling
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Take a Girl Like You
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TO
HILLY
PHILIP, MARTIN, SALLY
JAIME AND ALI

Memoirs

Kingsley Amis

VINTAGE

PREFACE

It will be seen that this book consists not of a connected narrative but of a series of essays or sketches. Most of them are about individuals I have known more or less well. Most of the others are about self-contained episodes of my life, like my time in the army or my trip to Prague in 1966, though here again I have tried to focus on others rather than myself. I have done so not out of self-effacement but for several other reasons. Most writers lead dull lives whether or not those lives may be fun to lead, and are likely to be boring to read about in any detail. Writing directly about my own would anyway not appeal to me, even if I had a good memory for that kind of thing and had kept diaries with any persistence. For the periods of weeks or months that I have done so it was, as so often, only to relieve my feelings over some personal problem.

This leads me to one of my stronger reasons for attempting to keep myself away from centre stage. To publish an account of my own intimate, domestic, sexual experiences would hurt a number of people who have emotional claims on me, probably as much by my writing of good times as of bad, and I have no desire to cause pain, or further pain, to them or myself. And without any of that . . . Who would want to read about the time I had thinking up and writing one book or another and what I felt about its reviews, sales, translation into Catalan, or about how I spent my summer holidays in 1959?

Even as they are, there is probably quite enough about me in these pages, more than I intended or realise. And I have already written an account of myself in twenty or more

volumes, most of them called novels. Novels they fully are, too, and those who know both them and me will also know that they are firmly unautobiographical, but at the same time every word of them inevitably says something about the kind of person I am. ‘In vino veritas – I don’t know,’ Anthony Powell once said to me, ‘but in scribendo veritas – a certainty.’

The kind of thing I have written here (allo- rather than autobiography) depends largely on a good memory for anecdotes and anecdotal detail, which I have. It is easy and tempting to improve on reality in recounting them, which I have fairly conscientiously eschewed in what follows, and in remembering them too, which I can only hope I have mostly avoided. I have purposely invented or changed nothing of substance. Of course, in the interests of speed and of limiting dullness, I have invented dialogue, but nothing that is material or is not the sort of thing that would have been said at the relevant moment. If some of the total result reads like my fiction, that does not point to its untruth, any more than plausible passages in my fiction are necessarily taken from life.

It will save space further on if I say here that I was born in 1922 in South London and brought up in Norbury, S.W.16, the only child of William Robert and Rosa Annie Amis. In 1940 the family moved to Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire. From 1934 to 1941 I attended the City of London School, first at its premises on the Victoria Embankment, from September 1939 in Marlborough, Wilts. In 1941–42 and 1945–49 I was at St John’s College, Oxford University. In 1942–45 I served in the army. In 1948 I married Hilary Ann Bardwell, by whom I had three children, Philip (b. 1948), Martin (b. 1949) and Sally (b. 1954). In 1965 the marriage ended in divorce and I married Elizabeth Jane Howard. She and I ceased to live together in 1980 and this marriage too was subsequently dissolved.

From 1949 to 1961 I was an assistant lecturer, then a lecturer, in English at the University College of Swansea. In 1958–59 I taught Creative Writing at Princeton University. From 1961 to 1963 I was Fellow and Director of Studies in English at Peterhouse, Cambridge University, resigning in the latter year to become a free-lance writer. For something over four months in 1967–68 I was a visiting professor at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

My chief works are listed elsewhere in this book. In addition, I published *The Book of Bond*, under the pseudonym of Lt.-Col. William ('Bill') Tanner, in 1965, and *Colonel Sun: a James Bond adventure*, as Robert Markham, in 1968.

Primrose Hill,
May 1990

FAMILY

MY FATHER'S FATHER was said to come from East Anglia, which at one time I took to be some remote and savage mountain or desert region. He was called officially Joseph James Amis, and in the family circle, sometimes perhaps with a hint of satire, known as Pater or Dadda. I can see him vividly as a small fat red-faced fellow with starting moist eyes and a straggly moustache which has confused itself in my mind with the 'Old Bill' style of the Great War. His nose had strong purple tints and, something I took to be unique to him, several isolated hairs an inch or two long sticking out from it here and there. He laughed frequently, with a great blaring or scraping sound of air blown through the back of the nose, but I find it hard to remember him smiling. I have only realised since preparing to write this how much I disliked and was repelled by him. Actually I saw little of him except at Christmas or an occasional birthday and that was quite enough for me. On one of the former he managed to give my cousin John and me one and the same tie as a present. A joke, possibly.

He enjoyed eating out, with I suspect plenty to drink, and I used to admire him, if for nothing else, for sticking his napkin in the neck of his shirt, then thought a vulgarity. At these feasts he was a great teller of jokes, typically without any preamble, to trap you into thinking you were hearing about some real event. One of these horrified me so much that I have never forgotten it. A Scotsman (I was still so young I had not heard about Scotsmen being supposed to be mean) took his wife out to dinner. Both ordered steak. The wife started eating hers at top speed, but the man left

his untouched. ‘Something wrong with the steak, sir?’ – ‘No no, I’m waiting for my wife’s teeth.’ I had not then heard of false teeth either, and imagined the living teeth being torn from the woman’s jaws on the spot and inserted into her husband’s. Except in greeting I cannot remember my grandfather addressing a word to me personally.

His house and chattels were more prosperous than my own parents’; they were situated at Purley in Surrey, quite a posh part and then, say about 1930, semi-rural, though already, I think, connected with London by the results of ‘ribbon development’. It was perhaps a half-hour bus-ride from our own place in Norbury, S.W.16, halfway back towards London. The grandparental mansion was called Barchester, but any Trollopean overtones must have been in the mind of some previous owner. There were of course servants, as in any even mildly prosperous middle-class household of the time, but Mater (no feminine equivalent of Dadda for her) was a careful manager, so much so as to be a source of near-legend.

It may or may not have been true, for instance, that she would leave out two matches for the maids to light the gas in the mornings: one match might plausibly break, so the reasoning was imagined, while more than two would be an inducement to some sort of pyrotechnic revel. To save lavatory paper, Mater would cut up and hang up grocer’s and similar bags on a hook, and one morning my Uncle Pres claimed to have cut his bottom on the lingering remains of an acid-drop, an incident taken up in one of my novels, the artist not being on oath. Being unable to recall a single meal or anything else eaten at Barchester, except at a Christmas or two, I can believe that Mater avoided entertaining where possible.

Dadda was a glass merchant or wholesaler, which meant he traded in glass or glassware, the kind you drank out of or less commonly ate off, and for years, my father told me, was doing well enough, until he began to be hit by mass-

production. Dadda had a big line in unbreakable glass. This is or was of course not literally unbreakable, just unusually tough, held together, somebody once explained to me, by inner tension, and meant to survive, say, being knocked off a table on to a carpeted floor. If too severely struck it disintegrates in a flash, goes to powder rather than fragments, implodes with a loud report. It was in keeping with Dadda's style of not preluding his funny stories that he should have crept unseen into the family drawing-room one evening with an 'unbreakable' glass plate and, meaning doubtless no more than to cause a moment of wondering surprise by bouncing it across the carpet, caused it to burst in the fireplace like a hand-grenade thrown without warning. The incident did not shake a jokey, excitable, silly little man like him. Not long afterwards, holding up one of his horrible amber-brown 'Jacobean' tumblers, he asked an important American client if he would like to see something. When the man said he would indeed, Dadda strode to the hearth and did his hand-grenade act all over again. I like to think that this demonstration did its tiny bit to bring on the decline of J. J. Amis & Co. at the hands of Woolworth's.

Dadda also figured in an attempt to obstruct or somehow muck up the marriage of Gladys Amis, his daughter and my aunt, to a Harvard professor named Ralph Foster, a distinguished scholar as I was later led to believe. Precision is difficult after sixty years, but my impression at the time was that the final attempt came on the very eve of the ceremony and that it was Mater's idea rather than Dadda's. I do remember that, summoned by Uncle Pres, my parents took off grim-faced on the fatal evening to help to talk Dadda/Mater out of their opposition. Since Gladys was over the age of consent, indeed over twenty-one, Ralph free to marry, etc., the old people could not have done much beyond acting like bloody pests and spoiling everybody's fun, but no child of my age then would have found anything out of the way about that. The surprising part was that, as

far as I could understand the situation, my own mother and father seemed to be on the right side. For some reason nothing to do with the personalities of those involved, it seemed much more natural to me that Pres and my aunt Poppy should have supported Gladys and Ralph.

Anyway, virtue and sense triumphed, the marriage took place and the Fosters disappeared to America. Sadly soon, at the unfunny age of thirty-six, in fact, Ralph fell down dead of excitement ('nervous heart') at a baseball game, but had had time to produce two children, Bobbie and Rosemary.[1] Bobbie I hardly saw or remember, though Rosemary appeared with her mother on this side of the water as a girl of ten or twelve, bright and sweet but too young for my sexual purposes.

America had figured in my life earlier, with American uncles, aunts and cousins to be seen from my early childhood, and if I took any interest in family history I might well have been able to confirm my impression that most of the ancestral Amises had emigrated there, to Virginia, in the earlier nineteenth century. I can recall a very Dixie-style Uncle Tom (*sic*), probably a cousin of my grandfather's, and a cousin Uretta, whose curious name was said to have been the product of a dream. She called my grandmother 'Aunt Ju' (for Julia), and very odd it sounded in her accent.

On my father's side I had, or was aware I had, two uncles, one unmarried, two aunts, one the soon-absent Gladys, two cousins and nobody else, and saw not so very much of them, despite the short distances involved – not so remarkable perhaps in what was still the age before the motor-car for most people. The only one of these likely to interest a novelist, I suppose, was my younger uncle, Leslie. After Dadda had performed his last noteworthy act, by dying of a heart attack (at over seventy, but some said he was helped on his way by negligence), Leslie took over the care of Mater and the rump of J. J. Amis & Co. at something like the same time.

I was content to let J. J. Amis stay out of my life, but there were expeditions to the household Leslie and Mater had set up in Surrey, a little south of Purley in Warlingham. I liked Leslie, the only one of my senior paternal relatives to show me interest or affection. He was a smallish, good-looking man, with abundant straight dark hair he kept carefully ordered, a bond between us though unintended on his part; at that time my contemporaries and I paid enormous attention to our hair-arrangement. As I grew through adolescence I was able to picture his horrible life. His routine took him every weekday evening from the commuter station to the pub opposite, where he would tank up sufficiently to face Mater's company till her bedtime. After supper on lighter evenings he drove her to the same or another pub. Unwilling or unable to get out of the car, she would be fetched glasses of port, though whether he used to climb back aboard to drink beside her or returned to the pub for some sort of company I have never tried to discover. Mater was a large dreadful hairy-faced creature who lived to be nearly ninety and whom I loathed and feared in a way I had never felt towards Dadda.

It must have been about the time of the war that my father told me, in earnest confidence, that he had been visited at his office by my uncle Leslie. Dad was very grave.

'Do you know what he told me? He said he liked men. Wanted to [he may have brought himself to say] go to bed with them. What do you think of that?'

'I don't know what to say,' I answered truthfully. 'What did you tell him?'

'I said, "I take it you've seen a doctor?"'

Whatever any doctor might have said or done, Leslie turned out in the end not to have needed one much. When Mater finally died, terrifyingly late, Leslie realised what capital he had and went round the world on shipboard. The passage of a few years had made possible franker speech at home and my father felt able to tell me, with much

amusement and fragments of envy and admiration, that, according to report, Leslie had fucked every female in sight. Evidently he went on doing so as long as he lasted, which sadly was not long, perhaps a couple of years.

For some reason I have always thought this a story ideally suited to the pen of Somerset Maugham, though he would have had to leave out the detail about Leslie's phantom homosexuality. I could bring it in if I were writing the events up as fiction: the presence of Mater had the effect of removing women from Leslie's whole world, but left his libido intact and questing. With her out of the way, his natural heterosexual drive was freed. Both Maugham and I, and plenty of others, could have worked in a couple of other touches I remember. On being invited to a bottle party – this, I suppose, would have been in the Twenties – Leslie had asked what was entailed and was told to take a bottle along. A bottle of what? Oh, anything. So in good faith he had turned up with a bottle of HP sauce. Then, during his Warlingham days, I noticed that he ate raw parsley in great quantities because, he said, of its richness in organic copper, though he failed to add what this compound was supposed to do for you. More likely it just grew profusely in his wretched garden.

Poor Leslie. Impressionistically, perhaps altogether falsely, I think I can recall him coming back into a pub near the village, where my parents and I, now of drinking age, were on a visit, after he had taken a glass of port to Mater in the car outside, and his painful look of attempted animation.

My mother's father was the only grandparent I cared for. He liked and collected books, real books, poetry books, had lined part of a room in his little Camberwell house with them. I wish there had been a time when he could have told me something of what he thought of these, but he died before his doing so would have meant anything much to me. I know what his wife, my Gran, thought of them from what my mother told me. Misguidedly, but by any reckoning

harmlessly, he would read his favourite passages aloud to her and she would make faces and gestures at him while his head was lowered to the page, which helped to make me hate her very much. When Grandad died, or a couple of years after, I was hoping at least to inherit a decent part of his library, but Gran allowed me five volumes only, on condition I wrote ‘from his grandfather’s collection’ on the flyleaf of each one. I took Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth, and have the Coleridge and the Keats still. Shamefully, I scribbled notes all over the Byron while lecturing on that poet twenty years later, and took it off my shelves.

To picture my Gran one has only to call to mind one of those horrible shrunken little old women dressed in black who used to sit on walls or outside shops on the Continent. Near her right eye she had an apparently bottomless black hole about the size of a pin’s head which put an extra tiny horror into her kiss of greeting. Every week my mother and I would take the bus to Brixton and change for Camberwell, getting off for a turning off Coldharbour Lane, Lowth Road. In retrospect Lowth Road strikes me as the archetype of the place the hero of the rags-to-riches film swears at the age of ten to fight to be a thousand miles away from, though it was probably nowhere near as bad as that.

Gran would bring my mother up to date with family news, how Lily’s cough was worse and Nell could not have long to go now. ‘One thing the doctor said, she’s got healing flesh. She heals so quick she healed round the radium needles.’ Gran asked me an occasional question about school, always carefully pitching her remarks at someone a couple of years younger than me, and once or twice ridiculed toys I had brought with me. But the star of Lowth Road, my knockout relative, was my aunt Dora.

Dora was my mother’s younger sister by some five years, dark, grey-eyed, pale and of a permanently disaffected expression, though she was always quite friendly to me. She

wore no make-up or jewellery of any kind, then a rarity, and her general appearance was to dowdiness what Lowth Road, as I saw it, was to squalor. I never saw her in anything but a black jumper and black skirt. Uneasiness radiated from her, as far as me, anyway. While some sort of talk continued round her, she would pick up and dispose of every fragment of debris, fallen flower-petal, empty needle-packet, scrap of fluff, single human hair on any material. My mother smoked cigarettes and from time to time would light one, always shaking out the match beyond any doubt before dropping it in the rather fancy ashtray. At once Dora would jump to her feet, take the dead match into the adjoining scullery and hold it for a good half-minute under the running tap before dropping it in the sink-tidy. No notice was ever taken of this procedure, in the sense that nothing was said, though there was plenty I wanted to say. I asked my mother about it on the way home.

'Oh, she's just a bit funny. She worries a lot.'

'But anyone could have seen that match was out before she picked it up.'

'It's just her way. It doesn't mean anything.'

Again, it meant plenty to me: it meant my aunt Dora was off her head, and can have done little to alleviate the fears of madness which have worried me from time to time throughout my life, unnecessarily it seems on the whole. Dora was, of course, not mad or anywhere near it, but suffering from an anxiety neurosis with obsessions. This was not a phrase I could have expected my mother to know in 1932 or whenever it was; all the same I think she might have said a little more than she did. But reticence on all such topics was the way then.

It might be worth adding here that my mother felt an envy and resentment towards her sister that may have amounted almost to hatred. With her auburn hair and fine complexion my mother was a pretty woman, as was agreed by my schoolfellows, no kinder critics on such matters than

schoolfellows anywhere. To my equally direct view, Dora was plain, and probably nothing more than fictional convention makes me think I can see from this distance something quite fine and clear in those grey eyes even while they stared. But anyway, Dora had been the one who got the fussing and the pretty frocks, as my mother more than once reminded me and my father. My mother had an attractive mezzo-soprano voice, which as far as I know she never displayed in public, but which I often heard at the musical evenings that were part of our social life before 1939. I never heard Dora sing, but it was affirmed that some music-teacher person had listened to both sisters, and according to the Amis side had pronounced my mother's voice the finer. But it had been Dora who had her voice trained.

And Dora sang in public all right. In the years before the Great War it was the custom for a professional singer, always I think a woman, to lead the singing of the National Anthem at the close of public functions, especially banquets, Livery Company dinners and the like. For that you got – Dora got – a free evening dress, a free dinner and five guineas. Not bad pay for 1910, and certainly enough to feel envious about.

Let that be. Once, in that small and remarkably oppressive kitchen which gave a view of the back garden, Dora said to me, politely as ever,

'Would you mind moving your chair a little this way? Then I can see if there's anyone out there.' (As far as I remember there was no way in from the back.)

No doubt wondering why there might have been and what they would have been doing there, my mother asked some question about hooligans (not common in those days, even in S.E.5), burglars, etc.

'No, it's just there might be someone there and I'd want to be sure of seeing them if there were,' said Dora.

Soon afterwards my Gran asked me if I would like to go and play in the garden. I went at once, no doubt feeling I should be more comfortable out there and perhaps safer too. The place consisted of a short concrete strip and two flower-beds half a dozen feet wide with a median path of what were probably cinders bounded by scallop-shells, and a terminal wall or fence. To devise a game for one actually playable in this space would have taxed the ingenuity of an Edward de Bono, while playing in the intransitive sense of frolicking about was limited, largely by the thickly planted flowers that Dora assiduously tended and I can see still with unexpected vividness: marigolds, snapdragons, Michaelmas daisies, wallflowers, though not necessarily all at the same time. To this day the scent of wallflowers recalls to me most unwillingly that garden at 27 Lowth Road.

Dora also assiduously tended my grandmother, and however much could be said against the inside of the house it was always impeccably clean and tidy. She was her mother's support. There was a son, my uncle George, but he was never to be seen, a couple of times only by me, and literally all I can recall about him was that he had curly hair and was a postman, perhaps considered too proletarian to be on visiting terms with my parents.

On the excessively rare occasions when Dora's full name emerged it was not as Dora Lucas but (Mrs) Dora Mackness. She was separated from her husband. Mackness, known as Arthur, was another singer, a member of a concert party called The Roosters, well known for entertaining troops in the Great War. I have no dates for their marriage or separation, though I gathered they were not far apart. My father, who had no time at all for his mother-in-law, used to say that the old lady, missing Dora's services at home, had enticed her back there with colourful fantasies about what Arthur might have been, probably was, up to with all those mademoiselles from Armentières when he was on tour. I find this more plausible now than I did when I was a young man.

There was certainly something funny about Dora, part of it to do with her mother. A few years ago my psychologist friend, the great Jim Durham, explained to me that the match-saturation and such things were items in a neurotic ritual designed to ensure the continuance of some satisfactory state of affairs, to be on the safe side, rather as the Aztecs would shed a few gallons of blood daily just to make certain the sun rose the following morning as usual. It always had so far and quite possibly the blood had nothing to do with it, but what proper fools they would look if they cut off the blood one fine day and no more days were forthcoming. In the case in question the object of the ritual, so I understood Jim to say, was to guarantee Dora's mother's survival. Leave that match in the ashtray and it just *might* . . .

Dora showed as much concern for her mother's life as could be reasonably demanded when, one night in 1940 or '41, a bomb fell near the house and she threw her body over the old woman's in protection, perhaps sustaining some injury. By this time I was old enough to see as little of those two as I wanted (i.e. zero) and have never heard what Dora did that was too funny to be tolerated and got her put into some institution, much as I should like to. She flourished in this place, putting her cooking skills to use and becoming a trusty in the kitchen. One day the news of her mother's death arrived and from that moment all her neurotic symptoms disappeared for ever, one of those events you can do little with except be mightily struck by it.

Having abruptly ceased to be a lunatic, Dora at the age of perhaps fifty was left with no place in society and nowhere to go. In a scene I should have greatly liked to witness, the hospital authorities, or one of them, pointed out to her that, these things being so, and her usefulness in the kitchen and canteen being substantial, perhaps the necessary paperwork could transfer her to, as it were, the production side. Dora accepted and began to rise in the system. I used

to boast to my fellows of having the only mad aunt who had done so well in the asylum that they offered her a fellowship when she graduated.

I saw her once more after many years when she briefly visited me and my parents. She was physically altogether unrecognisable, small, headscarfed, wearing slacks, lively and friendly, and to me most repulsive in a new way. My mother reacted to her first coldly, then with direct hostility. It is not hindsight in me now, nor I hope the pressure of cliché, that leads me to say I saw the emergence of a fraction of the resentment I have mentioned and sense of injured merit running back all those years, saw these things out in the open instead of merely inferring their presence. Such behaviour on my mother's part was most uncharacteristic, as was my father's upbraiding her for it after Dora had hastily left, especially such upbraiding in front of me.

Dora's ascent through the hierarchy of hospital catering continued until she was on the point of taking the top job in that sphere in one of the large London teaching hospitals, Guy's or Bart's, when she suddenly died, like Leslie all too cruelly soon after achieving her freedom. Not much more need be said of those two sad lives, except perhaps that if there is such a thing as progress it will surely have seen to it that these days neither could have turned out as it did.

When not reading *The Prelude* to his grimacing wife or serving gents' suitings at a chain outfitters' off Brixton Hill or playing the piano, my maternal grandfather might be playing the organ at the local chapel, having taught himself this art. The chapel was connected with the Baptist community centred at nearby Denmark Hill, a place probably better known today as the site of the celebrated and capacious Maudsley mental hospital. A tradition I have no reason to quarrel with says my mother and father first met as children in this chapel. No doubt they often met there subsequently but by the time I started taking an

interest in such matters that community had long disintegrated. In the intervening decades English Baptists had defected in droves to the established Church. Two of them at least had defected further than that, and my mother and father had abandoned nearly all religious observances by the 1920s, though for a few years my mother liked to go to church at Christmas and on Armistice Day.

Laughably as I once saw it, they considered themselves religious apostates, which meant among other things that they gave me no religious instruction of any kind, although they were perfectly hospitable to what I got at school in that line. My father was determined I should not have any of that chapel stuff ‘rammed down my throat’, not even offered with gourmet sauce. He also incidentally refrained from ramming instruction in playing the piano, an abstention I have regretted for over fifty years. But – because it has to come in somewhere, and this paragraph may need a bit of livening up – he neither directly nor indirectly offered me any enlightenment at any stage about sex, with the exception of a short course of harangues about what happened, in some detail, to boys who played with themselves. Every ejaculation (though my father put it differently, I am sure) thinned the blood and the victim eventually fell into helpless insanity.

Before you start grinning, reader, if that’s what you feel like doing, let me tell you that a chum told me how at his school each class as it approached puberty was taken on a little tour of the supposed masturbation-mania ward of the local mental hospital. I have had no opportunity of checking this story: the date would have been about 1945.

Having raised the question I thought it might be worth doing a little digging into the matter. Masturbation-maniacs belong to the realms of fantasy; schizophrenics, acute depressives and others unfortunately do not. It seems very likely that my chum, who was certainly not pulling my leg

about what he thought he had seen, had been shown some of these poor creatures in their ward and had them passed off on him as victims of the dreaded habit. It seems likely too that this treatment was not uncommon, and if you find that hard to believe, reflect that most of you were not educated by men born in Victorian times or immediately after. It is just the sort of thing – isn't it? – that got the Victorians a bad name.

The Bible, or Black Book, of the wanking-kills school was the work of the celebrated William Acton (1813–75), who in the latter year published *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*. When these are misused in the way under discussion, says Acton, the complexion becomes pasty and riddled with acne (nice one!), the growth is stunted, *the blood is thinned*, the sufferer becomes unclean in his person, avoids his fellows and after other untoward experiences becomes blind and helpless. The stoutest – well, heart might be forgiven for quailing after a run-through of these points. Not that my father ever went quite that far.

I was sensible enough not to believe his warnings, which he topped up every so often, but to keep my disbelief to myself. Thereafter I went my own way under a pact of silence and dissimulation. This suited him, who despite his willingness to deliver warnings about madness was instinctively shy about these matters. Apart from the fact of my own existence, no sort of detail of his sexual life ever reached me until very late on. I have often been tempted to think that it was never a very active one, but experience teaches that nothing is likely to fall more wildly astray than this sort of judgement, even as regards contemporaries whom one knows intimately.

If it was silly and perhaps worse of my father to have given me the blood-thinning lectures, it was wrong of him not to have given me any version at all of what he might have called the facts of life. With a good deal of omission that with some justice would outrage a feminist, my working

knowledge or stock of shoddily informed part-guesswork about them was in place by the time I was about seven, standard for my era, class, etc., and of course it was picked up from my mates. I see nothing very terrible about that. What was increasingly bloody in my case was that I was never given the all-clear, in other words my parents went on and on not making it all right for me to refer to physical sex or even to let it be seen that I knew about it.

I must have been fourteen when the woman next door made in my hearing some very mild reference to somebody's honeymoon or some such depravity. My mother gave her a fierce (and absurdly visible) shake of the head. This state of affairs gravely impeded parts of social communion with chums' parents and the like. I must have been sixteen before my mother said, 'Well, I suppose by now you know all there is to know about marriage and so on,' and I said, 'Yes, I think so, Mum.' I liked her too much to add, 'but you'd have made my life a good bit easier if you'd said something like that to me about six years ago.'

As I have already implied, sex instruction in the home is often – usually? I don't know – not instruction but a formal permit. But it must be given. I shall never forget the scene when it came to my turn. I swear it began with me hearing my wife saying somewhere out of shot, 'Your father wants to speak to you in his study' – a room big enough, say, to accommodate a full-grown rhinoceros, though without giving him much room to turn round.

Philip and Martin came in, their expressions quite blank, innocent in every possible way that the most expensive film-director could have put there. They were, I suppose, seven and six years old. The short monologue I gave them slipped out of my head afterwards at the first opportunity, though I know I did conscientiously get in a certain amount of what might be called hard anatomy and concrete nouns, although again I must have used the word 'thing' a good deal and talked about Dad planting a seed. Well, what would

you? I have never loved and admired them more than for the unruffled calm and seriousness with which they heard me out. I knew they knew, they knew I knew they knew and so on to the end but never mind. They left in a silence that they courteously prolonged until they were out of all hearing. It was a couple of years before Philip confided to me that he had muttered, ‘Hold on to your hat – he’s going to tell us the big one’ as the two made their way to my ‘study’. But we did it. In no sphere is it truer that it is necessary to say what it is unnecessary to say.

To return to my father and his attempts to influence my sex-life: the date of his last veto of masturbation is unrecorded, but it must have been before 1939. In that year I became seventeen years old and was fast approaching a far deadlier threat: fornication territory, though like over 95 per cent (I should guess) of my mates I had not yet reached it. But in that year too the war came and whisked me off to Wiltshire as an evacuee schoolboy, soon to be translated to Oxford, not quite so soon, but soon enough, into the army. I am sure my father was sorry to lose my company, but the thought that my sex-life was at last beyond his ken must have softened the blow a little. Peace was shattered, however, by the great adultery explosion.

By a series of implausibilities and coincidences unacceptable in any kind of fiction or drama, reflecting moreover no kind of discredit on my father, he found out I was having an affair with a married woman. As well as really shocking him this put him in a fix. He could not withhold my pocket-money, which now derived from the army paymaster; he could not kick me out of the house, his own house where I was at the time on leave, with my mother, anxious for my company, also within its walls: the guilty woman was over 200 miles away. What he did was write me a letter, a paragraphed 500-worder with all the commas and much else in place: he could read and write. I am heartily glad not to have that letter by me now. I had let him down,

he said, and here and there he made me feel I had. (Remember that this was 1943 and I was twenty-one.) More painful was his self-reproach at not having seen to it that my morality had been trained to resist such temptation. ‘I’d ask you to give her up,’ he said, ‘if I thought you’d take the slightest notice,’ which daunted me. Then he managed a snobbish insinuation about her and I immediately felt better.

So far it might seem that my father’s religious activities were confined to the negative one of not ramming beliefs, etc., and the equally negative one, in a different sense, of preventing me from having a sex-life. (He also objected to the use of the name of Christ as a swear-word – just inaccurate snobbery, really.) But all the Christian morality that went with the doctrine I suppose he thought he had thrown out, or at least kept quiet about, stayed in place: the conscientiousness, the patience, the frugality. He knew this some of the time. With all his theoretical disbelief or unbelief or, at least as likely, simple boredom, it was at the same time totally characteristic that, when plunged into unusually deep despair about my shortcomings, he was likely to put them down to my complete lack of religion. And I should not be truly his son if I had never felt that he had something there. And religion meant behaving like a pious Protestant. Matthew Arnold would have worried less about the survival of Christian ethics in an age without literal faith if he could have had a couple of chats with the old man.

In all this and much else my father was characteristic of his place and time – b. London 1889, d. Cambridge 1963. With Uncle Pres and Uncle Les he attended the City of London School, removed only a year or two ago from its century-old home on the Victoria Embankment. No university – Dadda’s meanness, I suspect; instead, a City office. There is a popular theory that we show how strongly we react against a parent as a person by how strongly we dislike or oppose his way of life or occupation. It seems to break down in the present case. I only disliked quite small,

fairly separate bits of my father and them not very strongly, not nearly enough to account for the trance of hatred and ennui the term ‘City office’ arouses in me. Anyway, there will be no more of it here. After a War spent tending airships in Scotland – a cushy one, if you like – he joined Colman’s Mustard and stayed until his retirement. Finis.

For parts of the training he pushed my way I can only be heartily grateful. I cannot claim to be more honest and responsible and thrifty and industrious than most people, but I am pretty sure I would be less distinguished in these fields if I had been brought up quite outside the shadow of the chapel. On the other hand, as I came to sense the image in which my father was trying to mould my character and future I began to resist him, and we quarrelled violently at least every week or two for years. It was not, I think, that I was unusually intractable by nature, nor that he took less kindly than most men to having his deeply felt wishes flouted, or at least contested, by somebody he had power over. Certainly, he had embarked on parenthood comparatively late, so that by the time I started noticing that he could be wrong about things he was already in his middle forties and, perhaps, less resilient than earlier. He had not, moreover, re-embarked on parenthood, and this had the common effect of sharpening our conflict.

An only child is short not so much of allies, of potential supporters, as of means of dilution and diversion, simply another body to share the parental attention. This isolation may make him overready to defend his interests. For my own part, I had acquired from somewhere a very liberal helping of adolescent intellectual’s arrogance, while inheriting in full measure my father’s obstinacy. The last factor alone was enough to launch us regularly on one or another conversational collision course, immediately recognised as such by both, indeed by all, parties, but not to be deviated from at any price. There must, I suppose, be families where this doesn’t happen.