



ALLAN CAMERON

ON THE HEROISM OF
MORTALS



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*For Gianluca, Francesco,
Dominika and Barbara*

~~“Let us say that life is hard. Let us say it in a whisper, ‘Life is hard.’ Comrades, I implore you on behalf of millions of people: Give us the right to whisper. You’ll be so busy constructing a new life that you’ll never even hear us. I guarantee it. We’ll live out our entire lives in a whisper.”~~

– Semyon Semyonovich in Nikolai Erdman’s play, *The Suicide*, which never got a chance to whisper its truth until very shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union

“... true literature can exist only where it is created not by diligent and trustworthy officials, but by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels and sceptics. But when a writer must be sensible and rigidly orthodox, when he must make himself useful today, when he cannot lash out at everyone like Swift or smile at everything like Anatole France, there can be no bronze literature, there can only be paper literature, a newspaper literature, which is read today and used for wrapping soap tomorrow.”

– Yevgeny Zamyatin, “I Am Afraid”

“Among Soviet authors, Babel was one of the most committed to the Revolution. He believed in progress, in everything getting better. And they murdered this man.”

– Ilya Ehrenburg speaking about Isaac Babel

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— ON THE HEROISM OF — **MORTALS**

Only a Fool Can See

I am a fool and that brings its own benefits and satisfactions. There are, however, several dangers that may not be immediately obvious to more sensible persons. It's true, I saunter through life in an apparently directionless manner, but being almost invisible I have to keep my wits about me and above all, my eyes open – otherwise those in pursuit of a title will collide with me constantly. They cannot see because they're concentrating on the greatness of their name. They are few, but around these parts they are increasing in number. They are nuclear physicists, company directors, judges, brain surgeons, politicians, head teachers, professors of medieval history, artists and writers. Dear me, I don't wish to suggest these are other than sublime *métiers*, but it is the doing of them and not the being them that is sublime.

The minute these practitioners clothe themselves in professional conformity, adopt the gravitas associated with their position and delight in all their badges of honour, they cease to be themselves and become less capable of performing their tasks.

These professionals will be considered the wisest of men as long as they do whatever everyone else in their profession is doing, but when they remember their independence of spirit, they are accused of immaturity, ingenuousness or even madness. Small wonder that they cling to the comfort of their titles and avoid the creative inspiration of their calling.

But what of the majority: those whose names were invented for oblivion, so that their acts could carry in the flow of history all the human good – the anonymous decency of those who put creativity before ambition. Surely we all remember the inventive teacher who inspired and in the staffroom one inspired contempt. She sowed seeds in other minds that blossomed later, while she in early retirement struggled in part-time jobs and knew nothing of her ripened fruit.

Surely we recall the doctor who embarrassed the consultant with his correct diagnosis, and found showing not the absoluteness of his knowledge but its independent precision in the case in point. Another time, he will curb his exuberance and feign his ignorance so as not to reveal that of his superior.

Surely we know that those who write are stifled when they become writers and have to speak and sell themselves and run the business of being a writer – when they cease to be the silkworm and become the moth.

As they rush by (or bump into me after a moment's distraction on my part), they shout, "You're all words and no action." How right they are! I have nothing to do and a lot to say. I have no time to get the words out. They stumble over each other in their hurry to find a form and sequence on the page. Forgive, then, my erratic jottings, for what they lose in elegance they make up for in sincerity, always supposing that someone who has no certainties can be sincere.

This does not mean that I wish to write in a plain style – "pared-down" lines to satisfy the heart of every teacher of "creative writing", the ones who keep Orwell's diktats pinned to the office wall. One of the first one is valid because Orwell – great for what he wrote and did – would have made a lovely instructor in the art of letters. No, no, quite the opposite: I wish to play with the readers and string my sentences out – stretch the elasticity of their thoughts.

When I say I'm a fool, this is not urbane self-deprecation. Hell, no. Those who know me would laugh at your charity. ~~How else to describe a man who does not know how to live, to love, to be loyal, to be courageous?~~ But all knowledge starts with self-knowledge, and I know my limitations and I see the heroic greatness of others and the great hubris of others still. So let me tell you these stories based on things I have observed and things I have imagined. They are the most solid of my possessions, and willingly I share them with you. They lack structure, it's true, and they lack finery. Nor will I entice you with suspense or reassure you about the worthiness or relative worthiness of our society as some of our great writers do, especially when writing about a particular day of the week. There's nothing Panglossian about my stories. Nothing is in its place and nothing is the best possible. Everything is the product of the greatness of our neglected hearts and the weakness of our minds surfeited on mass-produced entertainments. No one is wholly good and no one wholly bad, for it is the moral greyness of our world that makes morality possible – and the lack of it.

To write a good book you need to lack certainty and discover style – or rather a style that suits your voice but is not your voice. To write a great book you *also* need humility, honesty and compassion. Even Nietzsche, who claimed to detest these things and counted “the overcoming of compassion among the *noble* virtues”, was in fact overflowing with compassion – but like a schoolboy that embarrassed him. Compassion was girlish. And so his talent lent itself to ambiguity and occasional descent to dangerous nonsense. That crippled compassion and his ecstatic style were his greatness. His flaw was that he often wrote extravagant absurdities and stooped to dangerous intellectual posturing without however relinquishing his exquisite stylistic flourishes.

I am a little grey myself. I grew up in a grey, still industrial city, and somehow succeed in not belonging, even though I've never left Glasgow in my entire life. I've gone, it's true, for the occasional weekend in the country. You know the kind of thing: an invite to some posh place with too many bedrooms, which have to be filled now and then. I may not be part of smart society, but I do get the summonses to observe, because they instinctively know that I can do that – observe, I mean. I stand in the corner and observe those who go in search of immortality. They think I will discover their greatness, but all I see is their sadness. We mortals enjoy life more because our nullification doesn't terrify us like it does them. They have all that stuff and it makes them feel more solid. That they are more ephemeral than their buildings and artworks seems to them an act of divine injustice, while to me it is merely divine mischief-making – a little fun at the expense of those who have no reason to complain.

But I have travelled far in my mind and have no great loyalty to my city – it is perfectly comfortable and its familiar architecture evokes in me little more than mild fondness. It has a kind of soul, if a city can have a soul, but it also has a violent temper.

I went to its arts school, but dropped out because of a drug habit which took me another six years to conquer. Since then I have had a restless mind. I read and read. That barren activity fills my days, but what do I do with this accumulation of other people's wisdom? Very little really. I wander through Glasgow parks and engage people in conversation. This is not difficult in our city, and not just because of its famous talkativeness and banter. It seems that I'm not alone in my idleness. Well, idleness is what these blinded people like to call it. Idleness is not productive in their opinion, but what they cannot know is that idleness opens your eyes and makes you realise how much is going on: the intensity of emotions, the different tones of voice, the colour of our vain hopes, and the delight in each other's kindnesses. It is a world several light years away from the GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT, and it is entirely inhabited by heroes.

If I had been successful, I would have missed all this. Instead I would have travelled far and wide to visit identical hotels, and sunk into a bog of consumerist plenty. GDP would be my brother, and when the BBC announces an upward trend in growth or the Footsie One Hundred, my heart would leap with the same joy a man must feel on hearing he's a father. New life beckons and the cycle of nature complete. They think that our universe is a delusion, but we think the same thing of theirs. The madness is our wisdom. Of course. How could they think otherwise, given the extortionate price they had to pay at the entrance to that particular theme park – the dismal rides and games of that morose and dismal of pseudo-sciences.

I've only had one long-term sexual relationship in my life. It lasted three years and it was with a prostitute. I wasn't her pimp, you understand. I wasn't her pimp; I was her project, the beneficiary of her good, good heart. She saved me, but could not save herself. I left her only because of the violence of her life – all of it directed at her. I could never bear her heroism – her eternal baseless optimism. It started just days after I decided to come off drugs. She took me in like a lost puppy, and without her I would never have made it. Then I left her. Look, there were some scary fellas around those parts and she couldn't break free. I wasn't strong enough to help her. Not very heroic? No question of it. I am not a hero but an observer of heroism. You probably thought that I, being an ex-junkie and all that, was setting myself up as one of the heroic mortals. Not at all. I had a privileged childhood. My parents were working-class, and yet they gave me everything. My father worked on the railways, but he was a self-educated man and educated me.

He gave me enough to make me want more. I belong to the heroic mortals, but I am not one of them; that is why I am the right person to tell their tales. I don't want you to think this is all about class, although it does come into it. Ultimately, even those who sell their souls and close their eyes are all forced to be a little heroic. Only fools like me can mix candour with cowardliness.

The French would call me *déclassé*: neither fish nor fowl. Certainly I have never really worked, but I was and am a spoilt child. This has to be the starting point for anyone who wants to understand me. Many a middle-class child would have envied me. Like everything else, privilege takes many forms and mine was amongst the best. The only child of a loving and hardworking couple, I lacked nothing and wanted everything. Want nearly destroyed me and when I woke from my surfeit of pleasures I suddenly found that the delicacies offered by consumer society even in the sixties no longer attracted me. Only leisure had any hold. My only desire was never to be hurried. I occupy my mind, but only in ways that I find genial in any given moment.

I have of course played at various things. I have written reviews for *The Weegie-Board*, an alternative literary magazine set up in the early seventies. Once very radical, it now sounds like an elderly headmaster handing out clichéd compliments to his favourite pupils. The corporation gives me a few quid every year and it employs three people, two of whom are children of its original founder, once hell-bent on the destruction of property and all privilege, and the third is a smart young man with literary pretensions who also happens to be the boyfriend of the leader of the Labour group on the council. They still give me the odd review and I enjoy the status of venerable layabout.

Of course you'll think that a person like me will never have the self-discipline to finish a collection of short stories such as this one. I see your point and in part share your low opinion of myself. But I should point out that it takes great discipline to disdain all the pleasures of this bounteous post-industrial heaven, to reject the crashing din of lies emitted by our mass media and not to fall for the next crackpot conspiracy theory that happens by with siren call – just for the hell of it, just to believe in something and savour its small relief. Perhaps there is after all some small measure of courage

my cowardly existence.

~~My real contempt is for the immortal gods – the true aristocrats of our universe. They run no risks and cannot know the meaning of tragedy. They look at our faulted, gruelling and unsteady existence and envy us, but still don't understand. For them all emotions are muted: the worst that can happen to them is a slight disappointment, which in any case will shrink to the minuscule, as eternity pounds along its endless journey, and the best that can happen is some faint excitement probably ruined by the disdainful laughter of their fellow-gods, languid and worldly-wise after millennia of existence.~~

But then, don't our rich – so powerful and celebrated – also act a little like the gods? Languid and worldly-wise they affect a nonchalance that is not theirs. That too is heroism of a kind.

I know a writer and knew him when he used to write the most splendid prose I've ever read. Now he's just a writer, which means he's always on television or the radio. He writes about everything as if he understands it all. Last week he wrote an article about the humble and often maligned tampon, which, according to him, changed Western society and next week he will prove beyond all reasonable doubt that texting, contrary to popular opinion, will improve our children's spelling. There is no limit to the powers of his intrepid intellect.

I did some research for him on his best book, by which I mean the one critics liked and were right to do so. Another won the Booker and made him rich. Then he became a writer and spent all his time trying to recreate those moments of exhilaration – success with the critics and then with the public. But his writing has no freshness now, and I used to feel sorry for him until one day he came jogging past me by. I was seated and unusually had removed my cap, because of the heat. It lay upturned on the bench beside me, on top of some papers and the book I was reading. He looked at me quizzically as though half remembering something but unsure that he wanted to. He didn't see me because he was in too much of a hurry to be even more famous. He didn't recognise me because he wouldn't have been able to recognise his old self. Success and, more particularly, wealth divide us from our past and those who inhabited it. He saw me as a beggar, a profession I would never engage in: too much like hard work. As he passed he dropped a pound coin in my cap, where it sat lonely but important and cushioned by the silky, padded lining and the manufacturer's coat of arms, a little greasy from my hair. I keep it still, that coin only remarkable for the manner in which I acquired it, that round unit by which we measure the ultimate worth of our increasingly brittle bones held together by our sweating flesh – and I keep it well polished on my desk as a symbol of the folly of the wise.

The Hat

How many times did my grandfather tell me the story? So many, and every time there were new details; some of them conflicted with others very slightly. Perhaps he wanted to soften the cruelty of the situation; undoubtedly he told me more as I grew older. I think I know what happened; it was the moment he clung to and that shines through those terrible years. But I listened; of his grandchildren I was the one who listened without showing any impatience at what we all knew by heart. It was a story that gained its sacredness in the retelling. It was a holy story that spoke of man's humanity to man.

My grandfather was born Tadeusz Szlos, a Polish Jew from Vilnius. In early 1943, he had been on the run for months and had reached as far south as Romania. He wanted to get to Hungary, which at the time appeared to be the safest place for a Jew to be, in the Nazi Empire and its satellites. Unknown to him, the Siege of Stalingrad was entering its final stages, and for him all seemed hopeless. Life was about survival for the next few days. He dared not consider a definitive solution, an escape from persecution across a border now too distant even for a resourceful man like him. He thought only about his next meal, a place to sleep and rest, and a slow, circuitous movement towards a country that could only be considered less unfriendly than the others.

Having slept in the woods for several nights with a small bag of provisions now entirely used up, he went down a gentle slope towards a small rural township. He would never remember the name, although he studied a map of the area on several occasions. "I sometimes wonder," he once said, "about the existence of that nameless place, and yet it was there that the most extraordinary thing occurred. So small it was. A gesture of the hand that consumed not even a second of time and a movement of half a metre. Without it I would not be here and nor would you."

Always that. Always harping on about our insubstantiality, the wonder of his continued existence and, by inheritance, my own. Always about the story of the hat and not, for instance, the nuns near Prague who hid him in a coal cellar until the end of the war. Always because of the smallness of the act, its quickness and its anonymity. He would hold the hat on his knees and shake his head in disbelief. Even as he lay dying of a final angina attack, I suspect he still felt the strangeness of the moment in which the rim of the hat slipped over his hair and, being slightly too large, sat gently on his ears pushing them outwards. That a life's continuance could hang on so slight a thing seemed to madden and reassure him at the same time.

The difficulty in remembering the town was indeed its own anonymity, its unexceptional presence in that unchanging landscape. The church, the central square, the plain but solid architecture, the drabness of its citizens, now weighed down by the thing they detested most, the unpredictability of war. He moved amongst them quickly, studying their faces carefully as he went. Survival meant staying in the town for the shortest possible time, and discovering who could help. A man on the run, like a beggar; he learns to read a person's face, to know who might be compassionate enough to assist if the risk is not too high. A buxom woman with a kindly smile and a little sadness around the eyes was surely a reliable choice. He sidled up with a now well-practised artfulness, a mixture of assertiveness and supplication. Those who survived a month on the run had a good chance of surviving much longer, he would say, only luck could get you through that first month.

"Madam, could I have a word," he said in his heavily accented Romanian, but she answered him

German, a language he knew very well. “Yid! Filthy Yid! You’re the people who brought this evil war upon us.” The idiocy of her words only just touched him, while a few years earlier he would have been outraged by such bigotry. His principal thought was that he had misjudged, and now had to escape. She continued, as though addressing everyone around, but they ignored her and continued about their business: “My son volunteered and now he’s dead on the Eastern Front.” Fortunately she now appeared to forget my grandfather as she poured out her grief at her son’s early death. He slipped into a side street and headed towards the church. There were plenty of German and Romanian soldiers around in the border area of Bukovina, where two allies met and the principal language of the people was Ukrainian. A funeral procession appeared and he pushed himself in amongst the mourners. No one appeared to mind or question his presence. Bareheaded, he allowed himself to be drawn along by a crowd of black-suited men all wearing hats, mostly of a similar kind to the one he would hold on his knee as he told this story. It was a homburg, a cheap woollen one but neat in the stitch work attaching the inner leather band around the rim. It was a very dark brown, and shiny with use.

My grandfather was calm again. He had learned to rapidly regain clear-headedness. Like a hunted animal, his senses could pick up the slightest change in circumstance, which he then swiftly assessed. But what happened next had no slightness about it. When it came, it brought not agitation, but numbness, a terror, a feeling of complete impotence. An open personnel carrier lurched into the street and German soldiers ran off in all directions. Others halted the procession and only let it continue even more slowly than before, as they randomly selected mourners to show their papers. My grandfather didn’t have any.

He looked around and it was immediately clear that there was no escape. Surely he would be selected. Just as he let that sense of resignation seep into his consciousness like a cold steel blade, he felt the hat’s rim on his hair. Before the war, that unexpected act would have given him a jump and instinctively he would have turned to see who was responsible, but with his heightened senses he did not react and immediately felt reassured. He was not alone. Someone had come unbidden to his rescue.

My grandfather judged the distance to the German roadblock and then waited as they shuffled slowly forwards until he had covered half of it. Then he turned to see the hatless man who was his benefactor. He saw an elderly man, smartly dressed for the times. The man had a moustache and a goatee beard. Both very grey of course. He looked respectable and slightly severe, a teacher perhaps or even a judge. My grandfather tried to catch his attention, vainly wishing to express his gratitude, but the stiff-backed man refused to allow their eyes to meet. There was no quiver of a smile or acknowledgement of what had passed between them. So convincing was his expressionless face that my grandfather looked around in search of another hatless head, but there were none to be seen. He would never again see that face, “but I would recognise him like a brother if I ever saw him,” he would say with a determination that suggested such a thing could still happen – that he wanted to search the world for a face that could no longer have existed by the time he told me the story.

Just before my grandfather could reach the soldiers, his benefactor was called out because of his conspicuous hatlessness. They demanded his papers, which he produced with deliberate slowness for the vigorous man, and they grudgingly returned them. By then my grandfather was passing between the soldiers, somehow certain that he was going to be safe. Once he was, he turned only to see the back of the man hurrying up a hill away from the funeral with a sprightly step. His back was turned, and the enigmatic soul disappeared forever. A moment later, my grandfather’s mind returned to the business of keeping alive, but he was always to keep that hat.

When I was a young child, he would still wear it, but it was becoming very worn, and in his late

years he kept it on his desk, on a stand he had specially made. I was seventeen at the time of his death in 1990. As a teenager, I liked to go into his study to chat to him. He was an educated man and polyglot. He could talk on any subject, often with passion. His ideas reflected his generation: he became a member of the Communist Party once he got to Britain, and he left at the time Hungary was invaded. But he remained a communist for the rest of his life; the Labour Party, of which he was a fully paid-up member until he died at the age of eighty-two, never satisfied his radical belief in humanity. "Too English," he would say, which expressed his mixture of admiration and contempt for the nation that had provided him with asylum but often seemed to have done so less out of human generosity than out of patrician grandness that cannot distinguish between those who do not belong to its class. And he had been useful with his knowledge of nuclear physics, although his politics did stunt his career.

He was a man without animosity – a detachment that he learned perhaps from his fearful years on the run. "I was lucky," he would say, "I never saw the inside of a camp." However much the conversation ranged from language to literature, from science to religion and from politics to peace, it always came back to that hat that sat on the table, a symbol of the past, of brutal times and the human goodness that had somehow prevailed. He did not just retell the story. He spoke of the man, who he might have been and what he might have done after the war. Where had he gone in that most fluid part of Europe, where everyone was fleeing from one side to the other, often with a moment's notice? Should he have sought him out? I felt that what tormented him was not so much the fact that he had never been able to thank the man as his desire to find out what kind of man might have made such a gesture. "Any kind of man," I would say, "surely any man – or woman – is capable of such an act." But he did not look convinced by my answer. Perhaps he felt that he was going to die without knowing an essential clue to human nature.

Later still, he started to obsess about the hat itself. "Have you seen that?" he once said. "The hat was made in Vienna. This was a much-travelled man, someone with a cosmopolitan background. A real intellectual, no doubt."

"You just want him to be someone like yourself," I countered, "to reassure you that his decency was of your own kind."

He took this criticism seriously, and looked at me with genuine admiration.

"He could easily have been a local squire, who on a single trip to Vienna, the capital before the First World War, took advantage of the opportunity to buy a hat, albeit a hat that you have already defined as cheap," I expanded on the argument.

"You're right," he muttered as though bending before an unpalatable truth. "He might have been a local, small-town judge, a devout Catholic and full of those minor prejudices so typical of a man in such a station in those times. And yet he could sense the injustice of my plight and took swift action. All it cost him was a cheap hat and a few moments of bother with the German soldiers."

"Maybe, but he alone amongst all those people took action. The others resisted passively; I resisted actively. There's a huge difference."

"Only those who were in a radius of a few feet of me could have taken that action. Some of them might also have had no papers or papers that were in some way defective. Those were the times. The difference between him and the others might not have been so great." And of course he was right. There was the joy of keeping his company: he could pick over the tiny details of life, and that momentary act of generosity fascinated him primarily because of its anonymity.

"He might have been a bank manager or even an elderly clerk, passed over for promotion precisely because of his intellectual interests," my grandfather continued to speculate.

“There you go again,” I argued, “always letting your imagination run away and in a single direction. You are certain that he suffered in some way. Perhaps only in a small way. You think that only someone who has suffered can show compassion, but how can you be sure?”

“I can’t of course,” he answered darkly, “but statistically it is more probable. When you’re older you’ll understand.”

I hated that argument then; I probably use it now.

“He was not that conventional. This hat has a hard rim,” I pointed out, “and yet he removed it with two fingers and a thumb around the start of the dent running along the top.”

“My God, you’re right,” he said with a wry but friendly smile. “It is even more worn and shiny on those three spots, pressing under the crease and spoiling the hat’s perfect symmetry. And I always used the brim.”

“I know, and I expect most Europeans did. Isn’t there something slightly American about that way of putting a hat on one’s head and removing it? Cinematic perhaps?”

“You’re quite a girl,” he beamed, and I remember those words so well. “You should be a detective.” Then in a faintly troubled tone, he continued, “This only adds to the uncertainty around this enigmatic figure.” His smile returned immediately; this was his favourite subject.

A week or so after that conversation, he summoned me to his study, which was unusual. He sat down gravely and signalled me to do the same. It was almost like an interview, and certainly quite unlike our customary behaviour. He looked at the ceiling as though he had a clearly defined thought very difficult to put into words even in his head. He then sat up straight to glance at his papers, which turned out to have nothing to do with what he wanted to say, and finally coughed gently. “I wanted to speak to you about something of great importance. I have been thinking for several months about who should be the person to whom I shall leave my most treasured possession.” By then, I knew exactly where he was going, and was feeling a little disappointed. My grandfather owned many beautiful things: books, paintings and various objects collected on his travels to academic conferences. “It will probably come as something of a surprise, but I know you will be delighted that I have chosen you and not one of the other grandchildren. They will want things of value; they’re all a little bourgeois, you know.” I nodded guiltily. “You are ... and I feel a little silly telling you this ... my favourite grandchild by far. I suppose because I see a lot of myself in you. That’s how it is. Crass, I know. But it comes down to that. I know that by leaving you the hat that saved my life I am declaring my preference, and that might please your mother, but it won’t please my other children ... and their offspring. I forgot in that moment my lapse into acquisitiveness and began to feel embarrassment at being crowned with that anonymous hat. A feeling of great pleasure and great awkwardness. What do you say when chosen for such a personal gift? It was as if he had offered to leave me part of his soul.

After he died, there was another strange event – a kind of informal ceremony – at which my mother and my aunts and uncles handed over the precious hat with its stand. “It’s a man’s hat,” my mother’s brother stated the obvious. “In a delicate state,” my mother added. They were not discourteous, but much was left unsaid. I was in no doubt that they found my grandfather’s decision quite bewildering; they perhaps had not noticed our closeness. As often happens in families, no one observes what is going on under their noses. Family relationships are often based on the intimacy of mutual incomprehension. My mother’s eldest brother was the most generous – in the manner of older siblings – and never lost an opportunity for judicious advice. “My father has paid you a great honour,” he said as he placed a patriarchal arm around my shoulder while leaving the other hand free to wave a finger authoritatively, “one that might quite reasonably have been due to me. But my father was a very good

judge of character, and if he chose you, he did so for a good reason. You must show yourself worthy of the trust he has placed in you.”

So the hat was moved from his desk to my bedroom and then to the various studies that I have had in various homes. I have not been in the habit of speaking about it to many people, but it is the thing that holds me to my grandfather, to whom I was closer than to my own parents – with their perennial squabbling, their competitiveness between themselves and jointly with others, and their great love of possessions. For strangely, when that hat became part of me, I lost all my hankering for other things. With it I also inherited from my grandfather’s very limited needs – excepting the greedy and insatiable need to understand, which is of course no small thing and requires the right kind of job and the right kind of mind.

I have failed in life. Of course. We all do.

I have failed as an academic. I have failed to formulate my ideas and pass them on to others. I have failed to engage with colleagues, so fixated was I with my own research. I rejected all the compromises you have to make if you’re to get anywhere, but compromised with those outside work who made demands upon my time. Somehow I have betrayed my talents, when that was the thing I least wanted to do. How is it that my grandfather got all these things right, even after those years of suffering? He thought that I was like him; how wrong he was.

I have failed as a wife, thank God. I was critical of my parents’ shallow marriage, and wanted something much better for myself. I was the first to marry a non-Jew, although my parents were both atheists, as was my grandfather. Oddly my parents – particularly my mother – were against me marrying outside – outside what exactly? The race? That’s nonsense. They would, it appears, have preferred me to marry a practising Jew, in spite of their contempt for such people. And yet I cannot deny that they had their part of the truth, however absurd it might seem. When I look at my husband, my “English” husband ... but how can I say that? What am I, if not English? When I look at my English husband, I feel this instinctive irritation at the magnitude of his complacency. He is not a bad man – not a particularly good one either, I now think. He’s not uneducated – a qualified GP – but he shares that anti-intellectualism of the English middle classes. He wants nothing that disturbs his views, his certainties, and the pleasantness of his life. His beer, his football matches, his car, his climbing, his son perhaps, and oh, his wife. Once he found me an asset: good-looking, sharp, well-educated, he thought. Definitely an asset. But the world has changed and now he finds me a little extravagant – and not so pretty as I was. He calls me selfish, because I follow my career, and now that assertion has no effect on me whatsoever. It is not the emptiness of my marriage that worries me; it is my lack of belief in ever finding a man worthy of my love. I think that I want someone like my grandfather, who I thought a not uncommon type. I want a man who is passionate about ideas but calm about his needs and his relationships, exactly as my grandfather was. But do such men grow in this land of cloistered consumerism? Do they only grow from the more acidic earth into which blood has been spilt in vast quantities? What can we expect of a country that hasn’t known the misery of warfa since the English Revolution briefly turned it on its head? My husband comes home and talks brightly of nothing, and when I stare at him with disenchantment clearly stated in my eyes, he accuses me of being moody and neurotic. Those words! If only he knew what a compliment they are; so much better than the other ones he showers on me all sugared with condescension. I know that I will leave him once my son has finished his studies. Not long now he is eighteen years of age.

I have failed as a parent. God forgive my soul! I had such hopes for him. I wanted him to be called Thaddeus, but my husband insisted on Geoffrey. *Nomen omen*. I do not know him now, and that is why I write. I came home last night and Geoffrey was in his room with a girl. I heard them laughing as

climbed the stairs, and was going to leave them alone, but he called out to me, “Mum, come in here. You’re going to love this.” Of course, the statement contained an obvious menace, but parenthetically involves these things now. I was expecting a humiliation. Still I knocked on the door. I was actually expecting a teenage display of inappropriate sexual behaviour – inappropriate for other people’s eyes that is. “Come in, come in, Mum! Nothing naughty going on here, is there Jill? Well, not yet anyway.” Jill produced a roar of unrestrained laughter that contained only a hint of unease when at last I stood in the doorway. She must have noticed my expression of horror, but she could not have understood the reason.

Though slightly drunk, Geoffrey knew immediately that he had gone too far. He adopted a defensive attitude that I knew was going to be stubborn. Jill’s laughter slowly died down. “What do you think you’re doing?” I sneered coldly, snarled perhaps. Something broke within me. He pretended not to understand, “Just having a little fun with Jill. Nothing serious, you know. Just a little fun.”

“Jill can go to hell, for all I care,” I said.

“I’ll not put up with this,” he said grandly and as he stood up unsteadily, he extended his hand to Jill to help her do the same.

They approached me together, Jill clinging to her brave cavalier. I ignored her and extended my hand in front of me to stop his chest. He felt the hardness of my hand; he felt my anger. “What have you done to my grandfather’s hat?”

“She’s mad,” Jill said.

The heavily ribbed hatband was gone altogether, revealing brown wool cloth of a slightly lighter brown. The crease was covered with stickers and, worst of all the other indignities suffered by my grandfather’s hat, my son had taken an orange felt-tip pen and inflicted on it a few words that would be enough to change things between us forever, “Running away from the Nazis”. Was this all he had taken from the story? The courage it took to survive Nazism was lost on him and was no part of his life. For him that period was history, and history is the past with which we have no emotional connection.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked.

Geoffrey giggled at the absurdity of it all. “I was telling Jill how we all descend from a hat. That’s right, Mum? A hat.”

I was now suspended between anger and exhaustion. Unfortunately I was unable to release the anger. That might have saved our relationship. I was lost for words, and there seemed to be no fixed point on which I could start to explain the sacrilege of his act and how important that mean little object was. It was made of wool, cardboard, leather and grosgrain ribbon, but it was a world of ideas that has been lost, of sacrifices made, of loves ignored for the greater good, of suffering and hopelessness. And out of that my grandfather had created his life anew in a foreign land and given me all he had.

“Clearly your generation doesn’t have the imagination to empathise with the suffering of others,” I knew, as soon as I said it, that “your generation” was an unfortunate choice of words – for me, that is, they put me in a weak position. I’ve always known that when speaking to the younger generation you must never moralise. I’ve managed this with my own students, but with my son it was next to impossible.

I stared at him – I must have glowered.

He coolly enjoyed the silence, and at one stage he briefly ceased to return my stare in order to share a knowing smile with his girlfriend. He then waited in relaxed silence for a moment of his own choosing. If we’ve given our children anything, it’s self-confidence. They have it in such abundance.

they hardly know it.

It's possible that what I took for self-confidence was actually his ability to hide his weakness behind a knowing exterior – bravado, also known as dramatic effect. We do forget what it's like to be young. At what seemed precisely the right moment, he started to speak in a world-weary drawl, as an overworked employer might with a recalcitrant employee. "Look, Mum, we'd had a hard day and we needed to let off a bit of steam. Exams are coming up and we're under pressure, you know. I suppose it's difficult for you to remember. I'm sorry if I've upset you." Jill looked up at him, admiring of his magnanimity. "It's a hat, Mum. People are more important than things," said the young man who had campaigned remorselessly for us to buy him a 4x4. "Your grandfather, I'm sure, was much more than a hat – a cheap one at that."

I knew that I too had to dissemble – to hide my anger and hurt. "That's okay. It is, as you say, just a hat, a cheap hat now too delicate to wear. But it was the only thing my grandfather left me, and it was for him, the most important."

He had his chance. He and Jill could have walked past me while wishing me good night, and then gone off to the pub to discuss the whole affair with renewed hilarity. That would have been the proper hedonistic thing to do, but Geoffrey also wanted to win the argument – which argument he was not quite sure, but he wanted to win it anyway. "Have you ever asked yourself," he spoke deliberately, as though it were his onerous duty to reveal to me what everyone else would have found obvious, "why your grandfather only left you an old hat. I'm sure he softened the blow with all kinds of explanation. Auntie Sarah got a Toni del Renzio."

"You know who Toni del Renzio was, do you?" I was speaking contemptuously to my own son. We let these things happen to us without realising that the way back may be very difficult.

"No, and I don't care. Better than an old hat."

"So value is purely monetary, even if you don't know why an object has value. It's simply enough that the market gives it value – that the general consensus does."

"That's about it. You've got it in one, Mum. Well done!"

"Even if, as was the case, the artist in question doesn't give a damn about any of that shit?"

"Right again. And I'd be much more envious if it had been a Salvador Dali."

"Who everyone has heard of. So that is it? That's all it is."

"Listen, Mum, I've got just two things to say here: you're a snob, and obsessed with values. European values – that are dead. And secondly, I don't care about art. It makes no sense. The surrealists, for Christ's sake!"

"So why do you care if one of Sarah's children is going to inherit such a painting?" I asked.

"Because it's worth money," he seemed angry at my obtuseness, and Jill failed to suppress a giggle.

"I think you should know that my grandfather was the person dearest to me in my life," I said and purposefully refrained from saying "your great-grandfather".

"Really? You know, Mum, you just live in the past. Dad and I are alive: what about us?"

"Better to live in the past than only in the present, because you can't understand the present without understanding the past."

"That's a cliché, Mum."

"That's what I hate about you, Geoffrey, you make me talk in clichés."

"Nice! A mother telling her son she hates him."

"I didn't say I hate you. I said one thing about you I hate. Aren't we all a bit like that? It's clear from this conversation that there are things about me that you find contemptible, to say the least."

"Not contemptible, Mrs Henderson, not contemptible. We just don't quite understand why you're

so upset,” Jill unwisely butted in. Her intention was to smooth things over and bring the conversation to an end, but she alienated both of us. She didn’t know that I preferred to be addressed as Professor Szlos. He looked at her darkly to intimate that her silence would be preferred. Family business.

“Right again, Mum, I do find things contemptible about you. You’re not part of our world or even our family. Dad and I do things together. We laugh at you, you know, and your obsessions – your quaint politics, ‘save the whale’ crap and that stupid hat. Get a life, Mum.”

“Loosen up!” Jill hazarded, still unaware of the risks involved.

“I have a life,” I said. “A very good life, thank you very much,” although that last statement did require a little bravado on my part. Each generation carried its mask. I felt in that moment that my life had been a series of wasted energies, but to have revealed that would have lost me the argument. “You can have political beliefs and still have a sense of humour, you know. You can care about humanity as a whole, and still care about that restricted humanity that is your friends and relations. In fact, one without the other makes no sense. And friends and family are all you’re left with, really, because we can change so little beyond that.”

“How sad for you that you’re left with us.”

“You know that’s not what I meant. Family and friends are the most important thing, but they will not benefit if you and they don’t engage with the world beyond. That was the essential idea that your great-grandfather carried across the channel – he and many others. They were fleeing oppression and not looking for utopia, just for safety, and they had learned many things. He passed them on to me, and I have held them dear. If I haven’t passed them on to you, then I, most probably, am at fault.”

He winced at that one, and so did I, because I’d used one of the basest parental tricks, but a very effective one. They left after that, muttering a few slightly conciliatory remarks I cannot remember. He was unhappy with the conversation, because he had not achieved what he wanted. He hadn’t flattened me. He hadn’t made me cry or supplicate like a desperate mother. He found me cold perhaps – too rational. We all have our own natures, I suppose, and the manner of his leaving sealed the rift from me. When the door closed, I realised that the son I had loved was no longer the son I had loved. I had always been aware of our differences, of course, but now I felt that I didn’t know him and, worse and more strangely, I felt that I didn’t want to know him – the pursuit of that ideal would only lead to further deterioration in our relationship. Perhaps a detachment of this kind is inevitable when children grow up – to a greater or lesser extent – but in our case, the rupture was dramatic and irreversible.

Geoffrey is not entirely in the wrong, of course. Perhaps I am aloof, and aloofness triggers a desire to rebel. He wanted to shock me out of it. I see that now, and that’s not an entirely mistaken desire in a young man, but it has to be accompanied by something else – a worldview that isn’t entirely based on personal satisfaction. It made me think about those post-war years when, for so long, it appeared that society would simply continue to progress in an unbroken line. Increasing affluence passes through two stages: first it liberates people from the drudgery of survival and they are even freer to think beyond themselves and open up their minds to new ideas; second it becomes an end in itself, making people feel self-important – surely such wealth means superiority – and closes off their minds to new ideas and challenges. My generation, which straddles those two stages, is responsible for the degradation of our values. We started by attacking our parents not without reason, but we did so with arrogance and self-righteousness. We should at least have held to the values we proclaimed so loudly, or at least, we shouldn’t have reneged on them no sooner had we reached the age in which the reins of power were passed our way. Small wonder then that our children were born cynics; they only had to observe the inconsistencies of their parents.

Generations are different countries, but they cohabit the same physical space – dividing almost every household. They may speak the same language – or almost – but the philosophical parameters through which they filter that language are different. Moreover the distinctions are gradated, because generations are gradated, and this gradation is exacerbated by people who are brought up by very young or very old parents or, like myself, are primarily influenced by grandparents. Of course the distinctions between countries are not discrete either. Intermarriage, migration and shifting borders mean that countries are never eternal entities. But generations are like countries in that the cultural difference is about the same: some continuity and some discontinuity. In this chaos, it is only possible to discern trends over fairly long periods – decades at least.

There is currently a stench of the thirties. It is not only the financial crisis, because miserably more than a whiff of chauvinism and xenophobia predated it. But the financial crisis will undoubtedly make things worse. My son Geoffrey will not be able to avoid political choices forever, and which way he will go is unfortunately beyond my comprehension. What is clear is that whatever influences may be laid down on him, they will not come from this home or from our family history. He is lost to me, but I cannot wholly despair of him.

As history repeats itself, some will go to the right and some will go to the left. Many lessons will have to be learnt from scratch. That is a tragedy, but it is one we should expect if we take a glance at history. Yet I believe – no, I should say that I hope – that this new generation will eventually discover an internationalism, an intellectual openness and, above all, a compassionate humanity even more evolved than the ones my grandfather brought over here with his hat. That would be progress, progress there be.

He – Or Is It Him?

“Maybe,” he said, his eyes wide open with the provocation that negates.

He carved the still bleeding joint with skill, fulfilled his only domestic chore to signify his station in the house – the holder of all keys, all levers of power, all needs, all judgements, all hopes, and all discernments of the past. He placed a slice – wafer thin, its lightness surely expressing the sharpness of his brain – also on her plate. The gesture – so munificent it too contained no weight – found universal delight amongst the generous profusion engendered by his loins, which he’d arranged around the table in the manner he saw fit. And then he sat down as can only sit one who sits snugly with himself, comfortably within his skin.

“No, absolutely not,” she replied. “I am the product of a single-parent family myself.”

“That may well be,” he laughed gently as a person might, if privy to the actual way humankind was wrought. “That’s not my point, and if I can be so bold, that’s statistically irrelevant. A family, you see, should ideally be made up of the following elements: a father,” he smiled graciously, “a mother,” he pointed to a woman with his knife after momentarily forgetting where he’d placed her in the scheme of things, “and the children of course,” he waved his inclusive hand to express all he had achieved to those silent witnesses to his paternal gifts.

“I don’t care if I’m the only happy child of a single-parent family in the world. My case alone can prove that a child may even gain by such a situation. I do not miss my father or a father figure. I am complete, and you cannot convince me of a deprivation I have never felt.”

“Of course, my dear,” he said through gritted teeth, “you cannot appreciate what you’ve never had.”

“Nor can you,” it was her turn to laugh, “appreciate the closeness of my mother’s love that opened every door to a meaningful adult life, and kept those shut that lead to greed and disdain.”

He considered her words with evident distaste. It was not just the content of what she said; it was also her methodology. He was accustomed to bludgeoning people with statistics, but she was defending herself with her exceptionalism. The powerless are more numerous, but inexplicably statistics always prefer the powerful, and provide every justification for their decisions after they have made them. She didn’t seem to care. She exuded too much self-confidence for a woman – there was surely something unnatural in that. The only specificity he found interesting was his own, and he was sure that everyone else shared that passion – for his, not theirs, of course. Outside his own specificity he felt that the “general good” should reign, and happily the general good always coincided with what was good for the English middle classes.

Initially uncertain about his strategy for parrying her argument, he resorted to what he knew to be a platitude – dangerous with her but it bought him time. “We English,” he said, “are a traditional people because we know the value of holding on to what has been tried and tested in the past. I’m sure your mother would agree.”

She looked at him in surprise, and he finally caught the argument that had eluded him – a good statistical one. “Look, you may well have had an acceptable childhood,” he expounded confidently and smilingly, “and even a good education – you seem an articulate girl – but the fact is that the slightest shift in the success parameters of a child’s early life can produce *huge* differences in outcomes in terms of happiness and competence. Did you know, for instance, that if you’re born in August, you

life chances are far lower than if you're born in September?"

"Statistically," she commented, "but there will be successful people born in August and failures in September."

"So," he ignored her point, "how much greater must be the disadvantage if a child grows up without a father?"

"But what kind of father?"

"If you'll just let me finish my argument," he looked at her fiercely and his wife seemed terrified by the direction the conversation was taking; "the point I'm making is also a practical one, you see. If you're born in August, you're always the youngest, weakest and least mature of your class. Equally, if the family doesn't have a car..."

"My mother's Swedish."

He looked stunned and for a few seconds all the words he had constructed in his head melted into a haze, and at the same time he struggled to give form to her words. "You mean your mother had a Swedish car?" he concluded, evidently impressed.

"No, I said that my mother is Swedish."

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"You said what we English think – by which you mean a statistical English person, but I doubt that even the majority of English men think like you. You said my mother would probably agree with you. But she wouldn't and anyway she's Swedish."

"But I said that ages ago, and now you've interrupted my train of thought."

"Yes, I was waiting for you to finish, which took patience, as you do ramble on a bit. When you got to the part about the car, I had to interrupt, I'm sorry."

"But I haven't finished my point."

"But you have. I'm not saying that in this unequal society, various factors don't influence the outcomes in children's lives, but they don't determine them absolutely. We also make our own lives and my mother made a family life in which I lacked absolutely nothing. Now that's an absolute fact for you."

"Absolutely nothing?" he jeered. "I would have thought you lacked something many would consider to be of great consequence: a father."

"Yes, I lacked that, I suppose. And he might have added to my life – but he might just as easily have been a violent drunk."

"Do we know where your father came from, given how invisible he has become?" he abandoned all pretence of the gracious gentleman.

"Yes we do. He was Irish."

He smiled exultantly as though to say now everything had been explained.

"I say 'was' because we know nothing about what happened to him. Apparently he left when I was six months old."

"Your mother couldn't keep him, then?"

She laughed contemptuously, "My mother would never have wanted to *keep* anyone. It was not just that intellectually she abhorred the concept of possession; it simply wasn't in her nature."

"But clearly he didn't want to stay."

"Clearly. My mother loved him, she says, but he needed her resources, which were probably being diverted in my direction. He was an unemployed artist. He had ambitions. It's an old story – but they parted amicably. She would have liked to have heard from him now and then. Maybe something happened to him. Our lives are not solid things, you know; it must be difficult for a man in your

position to know that.”

Once again the normally loquacious man appeared to have used up his stock of words. He studied her, and considered briefly the fluidity of relationships in the modern world. He failed to formulate a precise vision of it: he was English, middle-class, male, wealthy, surrounded by a subservient family and part of a network that went back to childhood and a school tie with narrow stripes of red and white alternating with a thick band of blue on which a silver canon was embossed at regular intervals. What could be more solid than that?

“I understand,” he said finally, “that I may have expressed myself badly. Of course there can be exceptions – although not many, if you want my opinion. You, on the other hand, must learn not to take things so personally and not to perceive offence where none was intended.”

“No, you didn’t express yourself badly.” This time, she was the one who smiled with a slight air of superiority, or was it impatience? “You have, in fact, made yourself very clear. You feel that my people are inferior to your people, and that your ways of doing things are the only ones to be prized. I could not disagree more. You, no doubt, pity us and feel that we’re unable to discern the deficiencies in our lives. But you see I feel exactly the same way about your lifestyle: how are your children going to be influenced by their upbringing? Here is your family,” she copied his gesture when he introduced them to her, “and they revolve around you like small planets orbit the sun. One planet is slightly bigger and that one represents your silent wife.”

The silent wife was silent no longer. She sprang from her chair with a leap so unexpected that everyone else jumped in theirs. “How dare you!” she cried. “How can you come into our house as a guest and insult us? It isn’t always those who speak up most who think the most – and feel. You two speak of things that concern us as though we weren’t here.” And then the mother lunged at her across the table, only just failing to grab the younger woman by her shirt. She had avoided further humiliation by shifting her chair backwards barely half a foot.

Tears were in the mother’s eyes, and he, now standing to his full height, had rediscovered the gallant gentleman in himself – the one he had only recently mislaid. He grabbed his wife in a restraining embrace which was not devoid of genuine affection. “She is our guest, as you have rightly pointed out. We must always maintain our civilised standards. We must never be dragged down to the level of those who unfortunately cannot share them.”

His magnanimous speech was only partially successful in abating his wife’s fury, although it did deflect whatever part of her criticism had been directed at him.

“She was attacking you, Dick,” she said querulously. “She despises everything we stand for – the way we live and the way we think. She’s perfectly entitled to her opinions, but would I go to her mother’s house and say such things?”

Now he was enjoying his role of bounteous arbitrator. “Miss Kristina is our guest,” he repeated, “and we must not only allow her to speak, but also listen and try to understand her point of view, however intolerant she is of us. Children, please take note – this will be an important lesson for you. We are a liberal nation, and if that means we’re occasionally put upon, then so be it. It’s a price worth paying.”

“Enough,” she said, having finally suppressed the agitation caused by the mother’s failed attack. “Maybe I was too personal about you and your children, and I apologise for that, but your husband infuriated me with his insinuations.”

“Mum, what’s wrong with being a planet?” asked the eldest girl, and a titter communicated itself around the table, leaving a smile and alert eyes with each child. The adults, however, had broken through too many of their taboos to reconcile themselves because of childish ingenuousness. The

was a long silence interrupted only by the occasional suppressed but expectant giggle.

~~She was the one who eventually broke it. Never given to talking down to children, she was utterly~~ rational in her explanation: "It's a matter of relativity. Planets are huge, but relative to the sun they are small and dependent. That is why your mother took offence. And she was right to do so. I apologised."

There were half-smiles and exchanges of glances, as the children assessed the peculiar situation they found themselves in. They sensed the tension, but equally felt that this was a much more interesting lunch than usual. It was then that she realised that she may very well have missed out on something in her small family: not the father but the siblings. She may have missed the complicity and rivalry of childhood – the sheer emotive nonsensicality of growing up with dissimilar creatures sharing an identity and a roof. Parents would be like gods who intervene randomly and arbitrarily in the lives of children, distant figures who must be placated, humoured and very occasionally remonstrated with. So different from the very close and intense but also coldly rational relationships she had had and indeed continued to have with her mother.

Her mother was her friend and they shared everything, including their most intimate thoughts. When she was very small, things had been difficult financially, and her mother could not afford to return to Sweden. Her mother was determined not to work full-time, but they managed. Once she went to school, her mother returned to her career as a research chemist and was thereafter committed to staying on in southern England. Interesting people started to visit their small flat: artists, writers, actors, musicians, free spirits, incomprehensible drunks and the occasional academic. Her mother was involved in none of these activities, but acted as a conduit between them, always smiling, always open to new ideas, always wanting to help these people make their careers. And she was at the centre of it all, because everyone sensed the mother's priorities: no one was more important than the daughter, not even those of them who became her mother's lovers. They, in particular, understood that the daughter tacitly exercised some kind of veto. She grew, therefore, in the midst of ideas and love, both genuine and interested. What more could a child want? Whatever she lost was more than compensated for. And yet she noted his children's camaraderie and it pleased her.

"Do you often get into trouble?" the same girl said. Clearly she provided the entertainment.

"All the time," she laughed, "it's my profession. You can get all kind of jobs these days."

"Shut up, Pandora," said the mother, angered by her daughter's fraternising, "I'll speak to you later."

He, who could have made a career on stage, had adopted the posture of an imperial leader negotiating with quarrelsome natives. "Kristina, I invited you here because I was thinking about funding your play. A few niggles needed to be discussed in an open and friendly fashion. Particularly your characterisation of the single mother – of course, I didn't know when we started our conversation that you are in fact the product of that kind of 'family', as they like to define it now. So anything I said at the beginning was quite innocent and there was no intention to offend – in any way whatsoever. I hope you understand. Unfortunately, you have hurt my wife with your incautious talk and I've considered ideas, and have created a scene that can only have been damaging to my children. It will, of course, be difficult for you to understand this, but I am the kind of father who is deeply attached to his family. I'm afraid, Kristina, that I will have to ask you to leave."

"I very much doubt you ever intended to fund the play. I believe you invited me here to show off your wealth and archetypal bourgeois family, and to give me a lecture. Well, you got more than you bargained for." With that she turned and walked to the door, and no one said a word. Both sides were now beyond words.

~~And so Kristina closed the door behind her and felt not anger but relief, and a sense of being fortunate young woman who had a life she was free to do a great deal with. She felt the smoothness of the breeze, which contrasted with the stuffiness of that great house. She breathed it too and sensed honesty with a world she felt no need to dominate, as obviously he did. Or was he dominated by the need? Did he live, or did life's leaden desires lead him?~~

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