

**The Anatomy
of My Father's
Corpse & Jeff
Nuttall**

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1

As a skin. As an animal hide. A joke-shop rubber mask extended to a whole body's length. What was it made for? A frogman? A bank robber? Was it a good fit? ¶ It wasn't a bad fit for my father, who has vacated it, leaving it slack and grey beneath its dusting of colour, in a box with the panelling, texture, and fittings of a hire-purchase wardrobe. ¶ A determination not to write this down in verse, this subject that lends itself so readily to poetry, that seems so extensive and ambiguous in its nature that it constitutes the very prototype of poetry, from the observation of which the practice of poetry primarily sprang; but to put this in prose that the wonder of it might not be that flexing copper irony of pain I felt before the Channel sea at dusk, when the sea itself was clouded with metal-browns from mud and clamorous hurricane clouds massed over the land to the north reflected. Not that spring to gratitude in the midst of grief for a gypsy's thumb-smudge of rainbow daubed above the clanging sea, not that cry that flings itself in the direction of loss to try and recapitulate something of what is lost and thus comprehend the incomprehensibility of loss in a strange rising wind. ¶ But that the wonder of it might be in the vast diversity of a comparatively unremarkable life, the absolute marvel of the day-to-day, the trivial, the rag-bag of experience that decorates seventy years of failure and modest success.

2

As a mask of paint that came as no surprise. The rouged man reaches back through *Selfridges*, *Lewis*, *Peacock*, *Bon Marché* shop windows, hair of plaster waved and coloured like the dip and swell of a copper sea under a threatening gathering of wind. (Right hand back as though just fallen from the bent-wood back of the round-bottomed chair, the chair drawn from the coffee table. *Shall we sit here darling?* Left hand raised with third and fourth fingers together, first, second, and thumb lightly apart. *May I have this dance?* or *Smell that whimsy. Ash of roses.*) ¶ That dummy in his blazer, in his tennis flannels (photograph of father lounged with young Astaire's laconic elegance, a tennis racquet aslant across his loose-jointed thigh, photographic ink now as brown as the English Channel) reaching back behind the basketwork chairs with a dusting of gilt over eau-de-nil, to the loose-limbed wooden mannequin on the top-hatted alcoholic's splayed right knee. "I think you're one for the girls, Charlie." *Yun shure za gulls.* "I think you've got a bit on the side, Charlie." *Git on the shige.* ¶ They danced when Dad put the penny in. The band played *Over the Waves* around Blackpool Central Pier and the nigger-minstrels banged their matchwood knuckles on clockface tin

banjos, dragging boneless legs of striped canvas under the Japanese rain of jerking wires. They danced through Crippen sitting rooms and cardboard torture chambers till they fell in a pile of discarded skin in a silver-handled coffin in the Chapel of Rest, *Tribe's Funeral Directors*, Worthing, Sussex. The wind has passed now. Jess Yates provides the music all in an April evening this rainy September. ¶ And behind their dance is my father wearing a foundation of *Nº Five* and a thin coating of *Nº Nine*, with *Novarro* eyeshadow and pencilled brows, a touch of lipstick giving him the gigolo kissability of Ronald Coleman, the nervous hand to the white tie a second before the punchline, to give him the poignant hesitation of Bob Hope, who capered with my father down a labyrinth of fall-about roads in those days before napalm and acid. The footlights dim, the spotty lad on the lights gropes a little round the foot of the dusty backdrop before his beam quivers to a halt on the piano keyboard, ivory-grained and softened to a delicate tobacco shade like the first two fingers of my father's cigarette hand. ¶ He sits in the traditional position, his arms and fingers splayed, leaning back at an angle like washing in a stiff wind, shoulders squarely facing the piano, face giving out all the personality at its command over his right shoulder. The purpled eyelids close and the teeth that drift through the small hours like a pickled specimen in their bedside glass gleam winningly out into the darkened theatre. "I'd just like to sing my latest recording. It's selling very well. It's entitled *One Night of Love* on the front side and *Kiss Me Again* on the . . ." Whole body swivels round, knees drawn up so patent leather dancing pumps are pointing at the floor, elbows are clutched over a scandalized mouth. Eyes are agog over the knuckles until the laughter dies. ¶ Return to savoir faire. "No – to be serious for a moment – thank you, thank you –" Mouths a silent one, upper set touching the very back of his exposed tongue on the 'th' sound, reddened lips pursed on the 'oo' sound – To be serious, a little composition entitled *She Was Only the Postman's Daughter, But Oh How She Sorted the Mails*" – piano crescendo ending on introductory chord, hovers there – the singing voice begins, a frail 1930s tenor with a misty-eyed fall at the end of the phrase, derived from Eddie Cantor, anticipating Sinatra. *I can be lonely out in a crowd, I can be happy, I can be proud, It all depends on you . . .* ¶ The mood has changed. The Pierrot postcard jokes have fallen away to reveal a face and figure never, until now in the coffin, without an appealing boyishness, a freshness, a willingness to love, however sentimentally. *I can make money and spend it. Go right on living or end it. You're to blame honey, for what I do. I could be beggar, I could be king, I could be almost* – run up the keyboard, slowing the tempo – *any damn thing* – grand final four bars – *It all* – piano run – *depends* – piano run augmented – *on you* – circus trill. Applause. "Thank you, thank you" mouthed silently over the noise. ¶ The Fols-de-Rols, the Blitzkrieg Follies, the Anti-Pessimists, the Victory Concert Party. Rattling unheated busses clanking through the blackened-out night to remote arms depots in Wales, to American bases in Malvern, to airfields in the midlands. My mother at home as the Newport

searchlights swept the smoke to the south and Birmingham and Coventry bumped to the east. ¶ Tired behind his teacher's desk, worried about horrors he never saw, worried about not seeing them, tormented by the death over the hill, a hundred evacuees to place and more to come. Wet beds, persecutions in the playground, boyish face aging, hanging loose.

3

As a garment discarded. My mother in the overfurnished overpolished house alone, stumbling sedated amongst the crinolined ladies with tea-bells under their skirts, amongst the gate-legged tables with mats of plastic lace, amongst the bluebell dells and the springtime woods, cut from calendars and framed, opens the suitcase collected from the hospital, starts to say, "Perhaps the dressing gown will fit —" then drops it, leaves the case half-spilled, the patterned flannel pyjamas. "Your Daddy loved to be cosy —" Walks out of the room, her jaw like jelly and her forehead like a knotted rope. The jackets, dark-in-light materials, light cottons for the bowling-green summer, hanging with their smells of tobacco and brilliantine, of peppermint and tea, neatly hung in an orderly wardrobe; the handkerchiefs in their drawer, his initials *KN* embroidered on the corner by his mother when he went to *City of Leeds Training College* fifty years ago. The dark socks and *Marks & Spencer* nylon shirts, the slim leather slip-ons, polished and immaculate under the breakfast-room chair where he left them on the night the mad bird pain came squawking and clawing and they took him to hospital. The flesh in its box of pale wood, music-hall upholstery all around the inside, moved from the high bed where he left it on the wild cold morning when the pain and the life and my father himself flew away over the sea, over waves that swung and heaved and threatened like angry metal.

4

As an artifact. A sculpture made of his remains by men who didn't know him. Who didn't know his hair went straight back, plastered close to his head with oil, who didn't know the oil darkened the grey to its customary black. A masterpiece by men in whose highly trained minds the ideal stood firm, that respectable relative of the painted doll, that Adonis that continues in the antique doctrine of the utterly average being synonymous with the noblest. That paragon of the etiquette of the lower middle-class who flooded into garden suburbs just before the First World War, flooded into garden cities just before the Second, that shining knight of the lawnmower and the straight-pipe, of the sleeveless v-neck pullover and the left-hand parting, that hero of the clean jaw-line and the clear blue eye, of the short-back-and-sides and the spotted

cricket cravat, who learned so quickly how to play tennis, who almost invented golf, who scarcely drank in his acres of publess private homes, unless it should be sherry or whiskey from the drawing-room cabinet, well-stocked but seldom touched. ¶ What can we call him? Jim Maitland? Bulldog Drummond? Did John Buchan and Rupert Brooke know that they were both really George VI? ¶ Nurtured and protected by repertory actors and funeral directors, by the watercolourists of *Woman's Own* and shop window sculptors, by *Madame Tussaud's* and *Moss Bros.*, by the grammar school sixth forms and the Freemasons, George VI multiplied and spread with his insignia of privet and roses, out from Finchley and Surbiton to the midlands, to the Cotswolds, to the south coast. Here in Worthing, in his dotage, he can stand on the bowling green on evenly balanced feet, his pipe held in his teeth at perfect right-angles to his face. He can sit behind his silver tea-set while the Pier Orchestra plays a selection from *No No Nanette* and Nanette herself sidles discreetly in her cap and apron through the tables bearing éclairs and macarons. He can look out with the way to the stars mapped out in his eyes from over a mantelpiece of auburn tiles, his perfect coiffure but slightly lifted by the wind from the propellor, a Spitfire taking the place of the seagull over the Sussex Downs. He can lean at a steep angle in black and white behind glass, propped on the baby-grand, he can smile indulgently from his stage portrait in the foyer of the theatre, a signature like a wind-storm looped across his left shoulder. There are the wallpapers and the carpets for him, the china cabinets and the sporting trophies, the gentility robbed of any threat of high style. ¶ The tenor of progress in Worthing is as even as its decor. The ground is even and the estates of bungalows and semi-Ds are utterly harmonious. There are no sudden corners bringing you among crumbling terraces and corner shops, there is no obtrusive industry laying its stench among the shrubberies. There is no working class and there are no hills. ¶ The taxi driver, having taken my direction, drives to *Tribe's* the undertakers and cosmeticians carefully, as though already taking his stately place in a cortège. He chats about the season, of inflation, of the weather. Parks discreetly around a corner where the vertical boards of the fence stand creosoted behind the evenly embossed lettering of the street-name. The traffic is an irritation. Eventually I cross the street. *Tribe's* premises look too small for death. Originally perhaps a grocery, perhaps a small café, the window displays of photographed coffins and fresh flowers is tasteful in a very special sense, a use of the concept of taste which is, itself, the subtle quintessence of vulgarity. Good taste with nothing of haute couture, with a cold puritanical eye for cultivated sensibility, the good taste of the three-minute egg and the limp handshake. ¶ The outer door in decent pale-varnished wood stands open, the inner glass door opens with ease. There is wall-to-wall carpeting in a dark rich colour, distempered walls, more flowers, chrysanthemums, photographs mounted in thin dark frames, a desk with a polished top, and a lady who is well-presented as that fusion of sympathetic courtesy and crisp efficiency, with just a dab of the glamour required by

dentists, private doctors, psychiatrists, photographers, house agents, expensive brothels. She is the heroic remaining sentinel who guards the public services against the coarsening disinfected tide of nationalization and socialism. She disguises the smells of anaesthetic, Dettol, formaldehyde with a puff of lilac-smelling deodorant. She closes a discreet door on the tiled enclosures where the shit and the pain and the sharp odours of practice are spread out under glaring naked bulbs. She can fill in forms as though she were copying down a poem, exact the fee as though she were being given a chocolate. She is a receptionist. ¶ She is, in fact, the second representative of *Tribe's* I've met. Mr. Warren came to the house within the morning of my father's death. He wore a good suit and carried all the necessary papers. He extracted dates and statistics from my mother's distraught mind like a jeweller plucking pearls from the viscid jelly of an oyster. He took a cup of tea with one and a half teaspoonsful of sugar. He said how, when he visited Bradford on a cycling holiday, he thought he had arrived in hell. And then he left, the master sculptor to direct yet another piece of ostentatious discretion. ¶ He it will be who meets the cortège, indicates the place where my brother and I should hold the dead weight of our legless weeping mother upright behind the coffin-bearers, carrying her into the violet pools of electric organ creaming out amongst the ochre pews, over the hushed maroon-carpeted aisles. He it is who will indicate when the curtain should move on its silenced runners slowly out around the coffin, so that no-one sees the oven door and only the tiniest evidence of crude function is heard as the pine and the flesh rumble a little going over the rollers. Mr. Warren will show us to our own bouquets and shake my hand before we get in his big black car. ¶ Mr. Warren's receptionist is different from the other lady in the parlour. She is middle-aged and smart, is even beautiful. She sits against the wall not weeping. She looks as though the bottom of her mind has just dropped out. ¶ "Ah, Mr. Nuttall?" says Mr. Warren's receptionist. "You've come to see your father. I'll just go and see if everything's ready." ¶ In a minute she's back. "If you'd just come this way. In here. Stay as long as you like." ¶ The ceiling is low. The lights are low. The low levels give the effect of some wish to modify formality, like low chairs and coffee tables. Consequently, the muting occupies some pointed area of effect which lies between funereal dark and the low lights and sweet music of the Hollywood seducer. ¶ And my father is only visible, in this low light, from chest to head. The part of his body bandaged from the severe surgery preceding his death is covered. Mr. Tribe and Mr. Warren are consummate cosmeticians. ¶ When I look closely through the memories of stage make-up and the brief distant jangle of the Lancashire music-halls where he learned so much of his skill, I can see that Mr. Warren's powder-puff experts have achieved a subtler effect. A man from Lancashire whose face, in life, was crumpled and stretched in the changing expressions of broad humour, pathos, rigid Congregationalist principle, had left the material here for the inevitable waxwork of George VI. The colouring is even, the cheeks

only faintly rouged. The eyebrows lightly pencilled. ¶ And the hair, the hair is lifted at the front, the slightest element of a cockscomb, of a *quiff*. The hair is quite different, showing how different Mr. Warren's artifact is from this pile of matter when my father had command of it. My father wore his hair plastered down to his skull. Like Fred Astaire or Eddie Condon.

5

As a dead man, as the looming spectre of the father steeped in death. Why does he seem so tall in this cosmetic light? Why does his head seem so big? Whence come, through smoke and war, the rigid phalli with the gaunt closed faces of armour, those eyelids like the folded armour of beasts, those clamped lips drawing up the jowl-flesh over jaw-bones in grimaces of severity? ¶ What is that special gauntness of the *Holy Shroud of Turin*, silencing sceptics with its deathly male hauteur? What is the visor of hauteur shut on the face of William Blake in death, that rubicund joyful little man, whose lower lip was drawn across as though the rigour were a challenge more exacting than pain? Who conjured from their vision, or from hard experience, Hamlet's father in his image most appropriate to the stately words that stalk, themselves like dead warriors, down the anonymous vaults of metre? The dead of Shakespeare arraigned in galleries, the dead of the American West arraigned in rows along the office wall, their hats askew, their guns in limp hands, that same tall spirit pentecostal in their heads. ¶ "I was asleep," said the undergraduate, "and I dreamed that a great tall Lazarus of a creature was standing in the room, a stalking emanation of death. So, shocked by this, I woke, or at least believed I woke, because a minute later, as I lay in bed, the bedroom door opened and the self-same figure . . ." ¶ The poet's joke: "The bathroom cupboard opened and a tall pink smell walked out." The imagined voyeurs of my adolescence, giant and fabulous under the hawthorn. The figures suddenly present in the corners of rooms, standing preoccupied at the edges of gardens, sitting next to Mrs. Proctor on the bus. The giants of the nursery cupboards, that archetype of tallness, that shaft of illimitable maleness stretching from the flesh to the edges of the time-space paradigm, that hood of music, that colourless elevation.

6

As all that's left of my Dad. A little Whitworth Valley boy, brought up in clogs by a fat warm woman and a highly principled man. A boy warmed to maturity through corner sweetshops, cigarette-card footballers, *Ty-Phoo* regimental uniforms, through Saturday pictures silent but for the piano played by Auntie May who gave him lessons, through lonely visits to the opera at

Rochdale Theatre Royal. Tears at *Madama Butterfly* and *I Pagliacci* that the other lads must never know about. A soul warmed into talent by those vast, warm, nineteenth-century chords that spread, within my father's lifetime, to the high-point of musical comedy, to the supreme popular songs of Victor Herbert and Jerome Kern, to the massive two-fisted performances of Fats Waller and James P. Johnson. Those modulated, augmented chords, rich with minor inversions, with major sixths and sevenths. *They Wouldn't Believe Me – Smoke Gets in Your Eyes – Stardust – Someday I'll Find You . . .* ¶ The Whitworth Valley stretches like a long gash in a dead thigh between two petrified muscles of moorland from Rochdale to Bacup. Farmsteads deserted now or adopted by commuters huddled two or three together around a shared enclosure for the sheep. Enclosures were made from slate slabs two-foot by four, set on end and slotted into the shallow peat. The grass that grew was short and grey as the beard of an unwashed old man. Little coppices of blackened trees managed a saltier colour to their shoots and shaded lush grass. A stream purled its way over orange rocks to work the mills that started half-way down the hillside. The towns of Whitworth, Tunnecliffe, Shaw and Bacup straggled over one-another's boundaries. Oddly angled terraces, some fronting onto steps instead of streets, interjoined by a labyrinth of ginnels through the backs, huge oval flags conducting everybody's clogs through everyone else's yard, around the bins, under the washing. A terrace jutting to the very precipice of a quarry. The gable-end decorated with battlements, rusticated. This lame pretension earning its name, duly mounted on the stone by the council: *GORMLESS END*. ¶ A cotton mill that filled the stream which washed along the meadow-bottoms beside the railway with a stench like the farts of an alcoholic. The colours of the stream, the purples, pinks, the peacock-blues of tempered steel. ¶ Richard, small-town shopkeeper and fanatic liberal voter, self-appointed schoolmaster who proclaimed a holiday for his dozen ragged apprentices when one wrote that Jesus Christ was born in Accrington, built Hall Fold Chapel. Looks down from the wall to the right of the pulpit from a vast brown tin-type photograph. A man with a beard and eyes whose expression is browner than the photographer's ink. The choir, the Christmas concert, the bazaars with long tables, busy women bearing huge brown teapots, trays of home-made eccles cakes. Presentation ceremonies, books with labels like Salvation Army banners, the names inscribed in perfect longhand, broad on the down-stroke, thin on the diagonal, sweet-voiced girls in white, breathless for their moment of glory beside the walnut upright. The presence of a tacit family moratorium that never rests, the certainty that everybody's actions be applauded, or condemned, judgement never suspended for much longer than a day, under that brown photograph, while *Lead Kindly Light* filters through the thin stained-glass out over the moor. ¶ From Richard, Walter, and from Walter, John, then Dick, then Ronald, lastly Ken, my father. Who was left at home while his brothers sweated and wept on the Somme, who sat listening to the *Home Fires Burning*, imagining the *Poppies Blooming Again*,

while the names thronged the front page of the Rochdale *Observer*, until all three boys eventually did come home. Moody. Changed. ¶ A quartet of brothers united by black hair worn by each in an identical style, by overhanging black brows, warm appealing eyes, never too far from laughter or sympathy, by a bone structure of the head giving enormous prominence to the brow and cheek-bone as it underlies the ear, by a bristly looseness of skin below the ear, by mouths of feminine sensitivity. So all four brothers owned two hairbrushes each, the bristles deeply stained with oil, which they kept pressed, each pair, bristle-to-bristle in their separate bathrooms. Each inclined to the plainest of shirts and ties and strong leather shoes with a high polish. All were heavy cigarette smokers, all smoked Player's *Navy Cut* until the filtertip arrived with the cancer scare. All had smokers' coughs as warm and reassuring as a half-crown thrust secretly into a small boy's hand. ¶ Uncle Dick, the last left, with a head of massive bones and eyes as human as an animal's, will arrive for the funeral and I will turn swiftly from the family group, unable for a moment to sustain the acute degree to which he embodies that spirit of humour and kindness, vulnerability, which they all shared. ¶ So little Kenneth, following the war, proved to be artistic at the piano, at the chapel concert, had the perfect timing necessary to spark hysterics from a corny punchline, to lean on a proscenium arch and miss and check himself like Chaplin before he fell, to peep at children round a door until they rolled around the chairs with glee. *Never get them off to bed now, Ken.* ¶ And books he wrote, and newspapers – *The Tunnecliffe Times* in pencil, which he sent to the brothers at the front. *The Menys and the Dobisaas* – two mythical factions battling it out in the Yukon. A detective hero close to Sexton Blake. A schoolboy hero close to Bob Cherry. ¶ So, university being at that time just a shade too grand for such as the Nuttalls, he went to teacher training college in Leeds, learned to be something more than decently dedicated to the barefoot scholastic body of Armley Junior Mixed and Infants, married a tiny delicate woman with emotions as extravagant as a hurricane, who came from a family in Clitheroe whose Methodism was even more severe than that of the chapel at Hall Fold, unleavened by the family warmth and musical traditions of Whitworth. A girl from a country town near the dales where the magic doesn't work, that draws strong and simple song in perfect pitch from smoke and granite terraces. ¶ With this girl, and me newborn, to Orcop in the green celestial vales of Herefordshire. Where he organized and sat on every committee, where he was instrumental in the building of the new parish hall, an asbestos shack in which dark Welsh girls danced with one-another while their swains beat one-another up in the field at the back. Where he saw that free clothes, made by my mother, were available to those who came to school in verminous rags, where he intercepted incest, helped illegitimacy, taught a row of farm-louts to sing cowboy songs in unison, ran two carnivals, one coronation celebration, and innumerable concerts and school plays. Sustained this giving of his organizational efficiency, which

was simple conscientiousness, this giving of fun and art, which was his simple talent, this giving of inexhaustible patience which was his character, at neighbouring Pontrilas, Hereford, finally at Watford. ¶ At Watford, his love was mistaken for lechery. Bellicose mothers, scarlet with their hunger for scandal, reduced him to a child bereft of manhood or mind for a while. A man whose fault was his lustlessness, whose milky core was love, lay shocked into whimpers on the drawing room cushions until his name was cleared, before the court, before the school in which he continued, before the family whose shame he feared, before the brown patriarch on the chapel wall. ¶ A man whose milky love precluded the possibility of his ever understanding the fact of human cruelty. Who, whilst the pictures of Belsen, Auschwitz, Buchenwald came out, to be followed by the statistics of Hiroshima, became totally silent, oddly, lamely bitter, puzzled, pacing endlessly around the lawns, reading bad novels, smoking, smoking, smoking, and once, when he didn't know I was in the branches of the orchard tree under which he stood, once weeping. ¶ A man who wrapped his kindness in a swathe of trivial habit to preserve it, hiding tea in caches round the house as a drinker hides bottles, that his intermittent cup may never be impossible, developing a ten-minute skill with crossword puzzles into which he plunged when conversation or events threatened his belief in benevolence, never walking far, never talking too far, to keep his hand warm and his cheek gentle, to stave off the conclusions of his own deep scepticism. ¶ And it's that flesh, that looseness hanging from his temple to the corner of his mouth, which I recognize now through the cinema of associations, that cheek that always came on dark nights, the father dark, the tall kind fable stalking from forever to forever with a country candle through the bedroom door. My father after all. Recognize him. Smiling.

