

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Precious Lives

Margaret Forster

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About the Book

A brilliant follow-up to *HIDDEN LIVES*, this account takes up the story of her gritty, northern father Arthur. Margaret's father was not a man to answer questions – least of all questions about life and death. So she attempts to answer them for herself, as she looks back at his life and indomitable character – from the perspective of his ninth decade – evoking incidents from her childhood, his working life and stubborn old age, trying to make sense of their largely unspoken relationship, and his tenacious hold on life, and on his family. His life, and that of her sister-in-law, Marion, were ordinary, and apparently unremarkable, but when faced with death lives like these become strangely precious, Margaret Forster marvels at the tenacity of the human spirit, at its capacity to fight to the bitter end. *PRECIOUS LIVES* is her most personal book yet: an intimate, true and wonderful memoir about living and dying.

About the Author

Margaret Forster was born and brought up in Carlisle. She is the author of many acclaimed novels, biographies and memoirs, including *Have the Men Had Enough?*, *Lady's Maid*, *Mothers' Boy*, *Shadow Baby*, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, *Hidden Lives* and *Rich Desserts and Captain's Thin*. She is married to writer and journalist Hunter Davies and lives in London and the Lake District.

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Margaret Forster

PRECIOUS LIVES

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VINTAGE

Prologue

‘THERE’S A DEAD dog down there,’ the woman said to my father. ‘Don’t let the little lass catch sight of it, it’s nasty; don’t take her along the river bank, mind.’ We were on a narrow path which led from the road to the river Caldeu. It was fenced on both sides with wooden palings, loosely strung together with thick wire, and between these struts dandelions and nettles, growing in the rough grass, poked through. My father stopped, to let this woman pass. He stood with his back to the fence and ordered me to do the same. The path was very tight with barely enough room for one person to walk. She would have to squeeze past us as best she could. She had a dog of her own, a scruffy brown terrier straining at the leash and whimpering. ‘She’s upset,’ the woman said over her shoulder once she was through the gap we’d created; ‘she got a fright, seeing that dead dog.’ My father started walking again, still in the direction of the river, and I followed. Behind us we heard the woman shouting, ‘You should turn back! There’s a dead dog down there, I told you! You shouldn’t let the lass see it! It’ll upset her. Cover her eyes when you get there, any road!’ This last instruction was very faint because by the time she gave it she was nearly at the other end of the path and we were nearly at the river.

My father hadn’t spoken, either to me or to the woman; he hadn’t reacted at all to this information about a dead dog. He always ignored strangers. Whatever they chose to say to him, he ignored them, giving no indication he had even heard them. Not a muscle moved in his face as he stared beyond them. Only if he was particularly irritated by being addressed would any sound escape his compressed lips and then it was a whistle, slow and tuneless. But now he was not whistling. We walked on, my steps attempting to match his, but he turned his feet out slightly and this was difficult for me to copy. We were now walking along the broad, grassy margin bordering the river but there was no sign of the dead dog. All we saw were ducks. We’d come equipped to feed them and I was carrying a paper bag full of crusts. I started tearing these crusts up and throwing the bits of bread, and the ducks squawked and fought over it until it was all finished.

We walked on. No dead dogs at all. I wanted to ask my father where he thought this dead animal might be but I didn’t. My father did not like chattering and he especially did not like chattering which consisted of questions. He wasn’t prone to speculation either. If there was a dead dog, we would come across it; if there wasn’t, if it had been a figment of the woman’s imagination, or if it lay in the direction we had not taken, we wouldn’t. That was all there was to it – nothing to talk about. So I turned it over in my own mind, all the time scanning the river bank and hoping we would find the corpse of the dog. About half a mile along the bank there was a little spur of land sticking out into the river. The dog was lying on the muddy slope facing us. It was a black dog. The water was lapping over its partly submerged legs, the slight swell only sufficient first to cover the legs up to the knee joint and then recede to just above the paws. Across the dog’s throat was a dark red gash. No blood was flowing; it was only sticking there, matted in the fur around the neck. We stopped. We stared. My father grunted. He liked things to come to pass: a dead dog had been promised, a dead dog had been found, everything was now satisfactory. ‘Dead,’ he said. I thought it might be considered permissible to ask a question. ‘Will it be buried?’ I asked. ‘Might be,’ my father said, ‘when the farmer finds it, a fox doesn’t eat it first.’

I was fairly sure foxes did not eat dogs. I was only six, but even so I felt there was something wrong with this suggestion. Foxes ate chickens. Lions ate dogs, maybe, but there were no lions in Carlisle, not even in a zoo, because the city had no zoo. But I hesitated to challenge my father, wh

did not take kindly to correction or contradiction. We continued on to Cummersdale then, and when we reached the textile factory we turned and began walking back. This was the prescribed length of the walk and it never varied. It was raining slightly by then and as we passed the dead dog again I said, 'The poor dog will get wet.' 'Don't be so daft,' my father said, scornfully: 'there's nowt poor about a dead dog. It isn't poor, it's dead. Dead as a doornail. It can't feel a thing. No need to feel sorry for a dead dog. It's had its chips. Finished.' It was a veritable speech. Excited by this unusual flow of words from him I said, 'What about a dead person?' 'What about them?' my father said, growing annoyed. 'They're dead too, if they're dead. Like the dog. If they've popped their clogs, they're dead. There's nothing anyone can do about it.' He was walking faster and I was half-running to keep up. 'What about heaven?' I panted. 'The heavens are going to open any minute,' my father said, neatly turning the question into a query about weather. 'We're in for a soaking. Your Mam won't be pleased.' We hurried on, down the narrow path again, into the road and along it, and there was the woman who had warned us about the dead dog putting her dustbin out. She saw us and shouted, 'Did you see it? You didn't let the little lass see it, did you? It would upset her, I told you ...' The rest was lost as we rushed up the hill past the cemetery. 'Upset you!' my father muttered. 'Damn silly woman – as if the sight of a dead dog would upset you. You've got more sense.'

We were drenched by the time we'd walked across Dalston Road and up Dunmail Drive over Orton Road, where we lived then. My father stopped when we reached our gate. 'No need to mention dead dogs to your Mam,' he warned. I understood perfectly why not. My mother's response to anything whatsoever to do with death was not my father's. She *would* get upset, even over a dog. But in that respect I was like my father. I wasn't frightened by the word 'dead'. I was interested, curious. Everything to do with dying was secretive and talked about in whispers, whispers which I tried hard to hear. It was the same with being born. This subject, too, was shrouded in mystery. It was equally hard to understand both – how life started and how it ended fascinated me but no one was prepared to enlighten me about either. My mother was emotional about births and deaths but my father was matter-of-fact. He appeared not to be afraid of death. It was just something inevitable. He had no religious beliefs, unlike my mother. He never went to church or said his prayers. There was no hint of anything he said or did that he thought of life as so precious that the thought of it ending was terrifying.

At this time, he was forty-four years old.

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On Whit Monday, three years later, when I was nine, my father took me to climb Catbells, the fell above Derwent Water. We left the house very early to catch the bus to Keswick. It was a magnificent May morning with the kind of faint mist hanging low over the trees which always signified a good day to come but, although confident of sun, we took our raincoats with us. We were going a long way after all, almost forty miles into the hills of the Lake District, and we wouldn't be back until late. We had sandwiches wrapped carefully by my mother in greaseproof paper, ham for my father and cheese for me, and biscuits. Beer and lemonade we would buy later, in Keswick.

Before we went to the bus station, we stopped at a telephone box. My father produced a slip of paper and some pennies from his pocket. 'Ring this number,' he said. 'It's the doctor's. Tell them to send him to 84 Richardson Street for your grandma. I'll keep watch.' I didn't even query the instructions or ask what he was keeping watch for. He didn't like telephones whereas I longed to have one in our house. He kept one foot in the door of the phone box while I rang. I delivered the message

pleased to have pressed button 'A' at the right time to speak, and when the doctor's receptionist asked why my grandma needed the doctor to visit I turned to my father, who was listening intently through the slightly open door, and passed this on. 'Because he's been sent for,' he said, angrily. 'She might be dying.' I repeated this, wondering why my father was so cross. I hadn't known my grandmother might be dying. It seemed good news to me. My mother had been at my grandparents' house all the day before. I'd heard her say to my father that his mother was very poorly and would need Dr Stevenson the next day, but I hadn't realised 'very poorly' might mean dying. As we went on to the bus station I started to ask my father about this turn of events but he shut me up. 'Don't spoil the day,' he said. So I didn't, though it did strike me as unfair that he was going off for a day out while my mother was going to spend it yet again with his perhaps dying parent.

The bus we caught was a double-decker and we went upstairs and sat at the front. It seemed a long and bumpy ride, with the bus going very slowly, its top deck brushing sometimes quite dangerously against the branches of overhanging trees once we were out of Carlisle and on the narrow roads of the real countryside. A double-decker was a cumbersome vehicle for such roads and its progress was occasionally unsteady as it lurched round corners, but we were always braced for the sudden interruptions in its speed. My father, looking ahead, could always predict when the nature of a bend meant the bus would have to brake sharply and throw us sideways and he'd tell me to hold on to the bar in front. I'd stretch out my arms to their full extent and just manage to do this. 'Good lass,' he would say. That was all he said. As usual, there was no talking, except if he pointed out such sheep, cows or birds he decided were worthy of comment.

Arriving in Keswick was exciting. It was so different from Carlisle, much smaller, the streets much narrower, and it was all grey, built of grey stone and slate, whereas Carlisle had mostly sandstone buildings. It had a different atmosphere too, full as it usually was of climbers and walkers dressed in all the appropriate gear and giving to the place a permanent holiday air. But in fact the streets that day were almost empty. We were so early, as we walked through them to the lake, that the shops which sold mountain boots and ropes and rucksacks were not yet open. It was becoming warm, the mist gone, and the sun beginning to blaze from a thrillingly blue sky such as we'd rarely seen in Keswick. There would be crowds later but we were ahead of them, ahead of all those still in their beds and breakfasts, and youth hostels and caravans and tents. The road to the lake was almost deserted and when we reached it and went to the kiosk where tickets for the steamers were sold it wasn't yet open. 'First in the queue,' my father said, with immense satisfaction. He hated queues. He had no patience and could not queue. We were also first onto the first steamer of the day (except it wasn't a steamer boat, though called that, but a motor launch). Again, we sat at the front. The seats were hard and uncomfortable, just three slats of varnished wood with high backs to them. The boat ride across the lake to Nichol End was even bumpier and noisier than the bus had been but we loved it. Ahead of us as the boat ploughed its way on, with masses of spray, between little islands we could see blue-black mountains silhouetted against the brighter blue of the sky. My father pointed and said, 'That's it, that's the one, that's Catbells.' I couldn't believe we were going to climb so high.

But it didn't take long. My father led the way along a woodland track and through a meadow and then we were at the foot of Catbells. He pointed out the path, and I was off, way ahead of him in a few minutes. I didn't keep stopping to admire the view, as he did, and so I was soon at the top, panting and hot-faced and longing for my lemonade which he had in his raincoat pocket. It seemed to take him ages to arrive, wiping the sweat from his brow and scarlet with effort, and then we spread both our coats out and he lay full length while I immediately drank the lemonade (which was disappointingly warm and flat and not at all thirst-quenching). Picnic over, I was ready to go down, but my father

seemed to be asleep. I wandered round the area of the summit, looking down at the shimmering lake on one side and into the densely green folds of the Newlands Valley on the other. Beautiful, but I was bored now. I wanted action. From behind the handkerchief spread over his face my father told me to settle myself, he was in no hurry to go down. 'It might be the last time I ever climb up here,' he said. I was puzzled. 'Why?' I asked. 'I'm getting on,' he said. 'I might not be able to manage it. This might be the last time before I go.'

Go? I knew what he meant. My mother, with her ever-present intimations of mortality, talked like that all the time. He meant he might die. He meant he might never climb Catbells again before he died. I couldn't see his expression, because of the handkerchief still over his face. Was he serious? But he was always serious. I sat down again and tried to wait patiently. Why was he suddenly sounding like my mother, with this uncharacteristic if oblique reference to dying? I wondered if it was because of my grandmother being apparently so near to death. Maybe everyone after a certain age starts thinking about dying.

Eventually, he hauled himself up and we went down, slowly, in silence. He never did climb Catbells again but it wasn't because he wasn't fit enough. He could have done it easily at any time in the next twenty or so years, but somehow he just never did. My grandmother didn't die then either. She had another five horrible years, completely crippled with rheumatoid arthritis, to endure. We never discussed how my father felt about this.

When we got home that day my mother asked if we had enjoyed ourselves. 'Grand day,' my father said. 'Smashing. Everything went right, couldn't have been better.' My mother looked at me and nodded. I wanted to tell her it had been such a grand day, such a smashing day, my father had thought about dying. But I didn't.

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My father's father, George James Forster, died when I was seventeen and certainly old enough to appreciate the significance of this death. There was a funeral, with a church service (though George never darkened a church door in his lifetime) and then a tea at the Co-op. I didn't go to either. My excuse was that I was studying hard for A-levels and couldn't afford to miss a single lesson, and that was accepted. I quite regretted that no fuss was made about this, since I wanted the opportunity to make a self-righteous statement about feeling nothing for my grandfather, no grief whatsoever, and that therefore it would be hypocritical to go to his funeral. I was very hot on the evils of hypocrisy.

Coming home from school that day, cycling up the steep hill to our house, I saw my father waiting at the gate. He was very formally, very smartly dressed, still in his funeral clothes. We had moved from Orton Road and now lived, conveniently for funerals, in Richardson Street, bang opposite the cemetery. Our front windows gave us splendid vantage points for funeral processions, of which there were a great many in Carlisle in the 1950s. Carlisle people seemed to treat funerals with a Victorian intensity – lots of big, gleaming black cars, all crawling along bumper-to-bumper; masses of flowers, lavish wreaths and crosses; every single mourner in black, and many of the women heavily veiled. I was fascinated by these spectacles and resented my mother closing our curtains out of respect, when I wanted to position myself in the window so that I could see everything. I was always curious as to who had died, and how, and what of, and would even go so far as to walk to the cemetery later on, to find the fresh grave and read the cards on the wreaths in order to work out as much as I could.

My father, when we were young, had often taken us for walks in the cemetery simply because it was more like a park than a cemetery if one could turn a blind eye to thousands of gravestones. I

could. They disturbed him not one bit. He saw only the high standard of gardening and it pleased him. He admired all the bedding plants, the rows and rows of bright red geraniums and the pink and yellow dahlias, and the violently orange marigolds, all arranged in strictly geometric patterns. He approved the brutally clipped hedges and trees lining the paths and he particularly liked the precision with which the whole cemetery was laid out, with everything neat and orderly. He made us walk properly in the cemetery, which is to say we were not allowed to run, or to walk across any graves, or to disturb any of the flowers. He didn't like me to look at the cards attached to the wreaths either. He said they were private. I said how could they be private when they were displayed in public, but he just said 'Don't argue.'

So there he was, after his father's funeral, waiting at the gate. Funerals had never bothered him and I saw no reason why this one should have done. I got off my bike and wheeled it towards him. I didn't say anything. I didn't ask him how he felt, or express any concern, or enquire how the funeral had been (but are there different ways a funeral, like a party, can 'be'?). He opened the gate for me. 'Are you coming?' he asked. 'Where?' He glared at me, furious. 'You know where.' I smiled, I hoped derisively. 'You mean to the cemetery? Isn't the funeral over, then?' I knew perfectly well it was. I knew perfectly well he meant go with him to look at the grave and the flowers. 'Anyway, no,' I said. 'I'm not. What for? Why should I?' And I rushed quickly through the gateway and up the path. Behind me I heard the gate being slammed shut so hard the whole frame shook and clanged. I turned to see my father marching off to the cemetery gates shouting: 'Right! I'll remember, don't you worry! I'll remember this!' I laughed. He looked so ridiculous. Then I put my bike in the shed and went into the house, where I described this little scene to my mother. She was reproachful. 'That wasn't kind,' she said. 'When he's just buried his Dad.' 'He didn't care about his Dad,' I said, 'so I don't know why he's pretending now he's dead.' 'It's a matter of respect-for-the-dead,' my mother said, wearily. 'Well, I didn't respect his Dad,' I said, 'and I'm not going to start now. It's silly, stupid, all this respect for the dead stuff.' 'Oh, Margaret ...' my mother said, sadly. I mimicked her tone and made an exaggerated face of distress, trying to make her laugh and failing. Often, I could make her smile by acting penitent, but not that day.

I made sure I was out before my father returned from his little pilgrimage. I went into the cemetery by the side entrance on Dalston Road. There was no fear of meeting him – I knew the route he would take and that he would have long since passed this point, the place where his own grandfather, after whom he was named, was buried. He always made us stop there and read the inscription so that we could marvel at this other Arthur Forster reaching ninety. He had an almost superstitious reverence for this gravestone, seeming to believe that if he read the name and the date often enough he, too, would live until he was ninety. He would have passed it that day, on the way to the new part of the cemetery, up on the hillside, where his mother and now his father were buried, and as I entered by the side entrance he would be walking home down the main drive. I would not encounter him and thereby lose face. We were both very concerned about losing face in front of each other, but he need never know I had indeed come, if not to pay my respects to his father's grave then at least to look at the wreaths. There were only six, a poor show by Carlisle standards. One from each of his two sons, one from a surviving brother, one from a sister-in-law, and two more from people whose names I didn't know. Enough, just, to cover the raised hump of soil and grass sods under which the coffin lay.

All I could think of as I stood there was that I was glad my grandfather was dead. I knew 'glad' was a wicked word to use with 'dead' but that's what I was, positively glad. He was such a miserable old man, spending his days crouched over the fire in his gloomy, dark house. What had been the poi-

of his continuing to live? Why should anyone be sad that it was all over? But my father was apparently feeling something, if only I could fathom what. Odd. I thought this very odd, and wished I could discuss his feelings with him. I practised asking him in my head but heard all too clearly the withering reply 'Don't talk daft.' So I didn't. I went home and said nothing. But I did find myself looking at my father after that and wondering if I would feel anything of what he had felt (even if I didn't know what that was) when he himself died. This event, his death, was something I'd wished for many times in the previous few years, but I'd just recently stopped wishing it. I didn't need him to die any more, because I was going to leave home and him soon, and so his existence was no longer of importance. The years of hating him were over. The sad thing was that I'd hated him with so little cause. He had never been cruel or violent. On the contrary, he had worked hard to feed and clothe me and give me treats. His sins were so trivial. I'd hated the way he shouted, his need to dominate, his scorn for books, his insistence that everything should be done his way. I'd hated the way he ate, his petty rules and regulations, his actual presence. Nothing to arouse hate, really. I was embarrassed to have to admit to myself how absurd my hatred had been. It was a relief to be done with it.

But all the same his death would not be something I dreaded.

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It was a glorious summer's evening in London. My sister-in-law Marion had just come from work straight to our house, straight into the garden, where she knew I would be sitting waiting under the pear tree with the chilled white wine and the Kalamata olives all ready for her. Every Wednesday she came and we both looked forward to it. It gave her such pleasure to sit in the cool of our shady garden and recover from her hectic day. She drank some wine, ate a few olives, sighed with contentment, and reached for her cigarettes. She lit one, head back, and inhaled deeply. 'Bliss,' she said. Not the wine, the olives, the garden, but the cigarette – 'bliss'.

Every now and again I went into the kitchen to baste the chicken I had in the oven. Whenever I came back out, there'd be another cigarette lit. In the winter, Marion never relished these pre-supper cigarettes so much. She was well aware that her brother, my husband, Hunter, loathed cigarette smoke and so she'd smoke only a couple then, sitting crouched by the kitchen door with it open a fraction, even on the coldest days. It made her feel furtive but she respected his right in his own home, and his need as an asthmatic, to keep his environment smoke-free. Until he left it at eighteen, he'd had to live in a smoke-filled house, where both his parents and his three siblings all puffed away, and he wasn't going to endure it again. But now, in the summer, outside, Marion could smoke as much as she liked and what she liked was a lot.

She sat and smoked, telling me about her day, which had been particularly fraught. She was a social worker, in Camden, and had had to see to the removal of an old tramp from a pavement. The tramp, a woman, had six cats, all of whom slept with her, curled up among her bundles of clothes and rubbish. The people living in the block of flats outside which she'd parked herself were complaining more about the cats than her. 'They want the cats put down,' Marion said. 'I mean, the idea, they're perfectly healthy cats. I'd rather they wanted her put down.' Then she laughed to show she was just being outrageous. 'Oh dear,' she said, 'the poor body's half dead anyway. She's got everything wrong with her, it's pitiful.' While she told me what she'd done about this case she lit yet another cigarette. Knowing I shouldn't, I pointed out she'd smoked more than usual. She shrugged.

It was silly to protest about her smoking, but sometimes I couldn't help it. It scared me. I kept reading about the proven dangers of heavy smoking, the sort Marion indulged in. She'd been one

those children who start cadging the odd fag very young, around eleven, and who by fifteen are smoking regularly. She was forty-one now and had been a serious smoker, on at least twenty a day, for many years. She loved smoking, adored it, and smoked with a passion incomprehensible to a non-smoker like me. Often I'd asked her to describe what cigarettes did for her, but she was never able to explain the pleasure enough for me to identify it as anything I'd felt myself. Was it like drinking wine? No, it was not, it was better. Smoking apparently did wonderful things. It soothed her but it also stimulated her, and she loved the taste. She was never going to give it up. She knew of the dangers but she was prepared to take the risk, announcing that even if smoking shortened her life she would settle for that rather than give up.

She didn't, of course, believe it would shorten her life. Her mother had been a smoker and had her lungs, when she died, in her eightieth year, of Alzheimer's, had been very healthy. But I'd read, the other day, some new report in a newspaper about the rise of lung cancer statistics for women of Marion's age and I suppose this was what made me worry even more than usual about her smoking. I didn't want to nag her – it would do no good anyway – but I mentioned that I thought she had actually increased the number of cigarettes per day that she smoked. 'Oh, don't start that,' she said. 'You know what I think. I don't care if it kills me, I don't mind about dying. It's not that I want to die, but I don't really care – not enough to give up smoking, anyway.' We started to argue, which spoiled the evening. I said she wasn't thinking of the dying, the process, just of being dead. She wasn't thinking of those who loved her, who would have to watch her endure this and who cared about her continuing to live, even if she herself didn't hold her life as precious. I ranted on quite a bit and she groaned and asked if that chicken was ready yet.

After she'd gone, I went over and over what she had said about trading years of her life, if necessary, for the pleasures of smoking. She'd said everyone had to die sometime so why worry about it, but, although Marion was certainly not a thoughtless person, that seemed to me thoughtless. In the midst of life we are in death, yes, but I'd noted by then that the moment people actually were dying the struggle to hold on to life became compulsive and fierce. Life, which Marion could be so philosophical about when in no imminent danger of dying, became exceedingly precious the moment it was about to be taken away. The dying want every second of life, whatever the circumstances of it. Or else it is wanted for them.

It seemed to me there was something I could not quite grasp about that. I wanted to know why life remains precious to those whose lives seem far from being so to everyone else. What, when one is dying, does this value consist of? Within the same eighteen months I watched my father die of extreme old age and my sister-in-law die, aged fifty-six, of cancer (though not lung cancer). Their attitudes and their experience of dying revealed a kind of answer that was on the one hand consolatory and on the other dismaying.

MY FATHER, WHO left school in 1913, aged thirteen, was certainly not illiterate. He could read and write perfectly well but he did neither fluently. Writing, especially, he found difficult, something he had to labour over, with even a signature requiring concentration. Writing of any sort worried him, and so it was a surprise after he died to find he had kept a diary and had written in it every day. He may have kept earlier diaries but the ones which have survived start in 1969. He gave that one up in May, 1970, he got to July before he stopped, but from 1971 he completed the entire year and as time went on wrote more, not less.

On 4 June 1990, my father recorded that he was eighty-nine and a half years old, but only did so in one of the two diaries he was in fact keeping, the *Expert Diary*, a gardener's diary published by D. C. Hessayon. 'Got out Bright and Sunny. Dismantled edge. Big job. Tidy up. 89 1/2 year old.' In his other diary (Nestlé's, given to him by my brother, who worked for that company) the entry reads: 'Bright and Sunny. Warm. Bit wind. Dismantling edge. Big job for me. All OK.' Two diaries filled in, with almost exactly the same mundane information, simply because he had been given two for Christmas and it would be a waste not to use both. I don't know what dismantling an edge means, though I expect gardeners do, but I know why he recorded a half-birthday: he wanted to reach ninety, like his grandfather. The nearer his ninetieth birthday came, the more impressed he was by his own age. It was hugely significant.

He was furious with himself on 2 July. 'Light showers. Mild. Cut grass. Front and Back. Had a Fall in Back. No Reason for it. Damage glasses. Worse. Eye. Bit blood. Pack up for the day.' Then he hid. He didn't want his kind, caring neighbours to see his damaged face. They would be concerned and might tell somebody, and somebody might call the doctor and the doctor might make him go to the infirmary, and he was not having that. So on Tuesday and Wednesday he kept out of sight, though he was worried that this in itself would cause suspicion. He was a man of rigid routine. He shopped every weekday in his local shopping area, Denton Holme. He walked the half-mile there and caught the bus back, arriving home at twelve noon precisely. This shopping was important and people knew it was. Strangely, for a working man of his era, my father had always liked to shop. It was a task he was always happy to do for my mother and he did it well, going to the covered market to buy heavy foodstuffs so that she wouldn't be too burdened carrying them home herself. Once he'd retired and she had had her first minor stroke, he'd more or less taken over all the shopping. So the shopkeepers at Denton Holme knew him well. They knew he nipped into the betting shop after he'd been to the butcher's for his sausages and before he went into the bread shop for his teacakes. Should he fail to turn up for more than a couple of days, enquiries as to his health might be made – which they were. Mrs Nixon rang up on Wednesday evening to ask if he was all right. 'Grand,' he said, 'only I've been too busy to get out. I've been sorting bedding.' Explanation accepted, he was relieved. He'd got away with his Fall and by the next day the cut over his eye had stopped bleeding and the swelling was down. He could go out again, and anyway he had to because he had no bread left.

This episode did rather emphasise how low he kept his stock of food and how shopping had taken on another dimension. In his extreme old age it provided the spur, indeed it fulfilled the positive need to go out at all. It motivated him in a way he liked. Again and again I'd asked him to let me fill his cupboards with emergency provisions in case he became housebound, but he would not allow it. 'No, I have to get out,' he said. He accepted a couple of tins of Nestlé's food which my brother occasionally

brought him, but he would not permit any methodical piling up of nourishing foods that would keep him healthy. This was why they knew him so well in the local shops and knew exactly what he bought and when. They were kind to him in unobtrusive ways. Realising that it was a struggle for him to load his shopping bag and hold his stick to keep his balance, the shopkeepers were adept at helping him. His worn leather bag was not very large and it filled quickly, but then he had not much to put in it, since he only bought two ounces of this and a quarter of that. Bread was purchased once a week, a large, thick-sliced white loaf, and filled the bag, but then he bought nothing else that day.

He didn't attempt, after his fall, to go to town that Thursday, though it was his regular day for doing so. It was an adventure, by then, going 'up street' and he looked forward to it. He went to Marks & Spencer's food hall, where they sold plaice, individual portions, in breadcrumbs, and since first I bought it for him he'd become addicted to it. He only bought this fish and a bag of Devon Toffees. The price of Marks & Spencer's vegetables appalled him, and he still grew all he needed in his own garden. On his way to and from Marks & Spencer, he liked to take in what was happening in English Street. 'Ruination' was his description. He disapproved of the Town Hall being painted in a terracotta colour and saw no sense in pedestrianising the area in front of it – 'it's like the bloomin' Sahara' (the paving bricks used were rust-red and the space wonderfully large and open). The attractive benches dotted around were an abomination and only encouraged idlers to sit about. But he missed his weekly jaunt when he could not manage it, in spite of being spared the tension of getting the bus. He had trouble dismounting – the bus drivers often pulled up too far from the kerb for him to alight with ease and he would attempt to get them to correct their parking position, which could lead to heated exchanges of words. Then there was the performance over his bus pass. He always had it ready, but some drivers didn't bother looking at it and he insisted they should. So it was exhausting going to town, but it was also stimulating, and he missed it.

Three weeks after this fall, my father's sister-in-law died. Nan was eighty-two, seven years younger than he was. 'Nan died. Change in weather. Carlisle Races' he wrote in one diary and in the other, still without the slightest trace of any emotion, 'Nan died. Change in weather. Dull. Run to Caldbeck H & M.' So I and my family were staying in our cottage at Caldbeck, twenty minutes away in the northern fells, which is why I came to hear his comment that day on my aunt's death. 'She had it coming,' he said. 'She was a good age.' There was neither regret nor the smallest evidence of distress in this statement. He had never liked Nan and there was about him that day an undeniable and not entirely pleasant air of triumph: she was dead, he had won, he was going to make ninety. He didn't seem to regard Nan's death as heralding his own. There was no sighing, no shuddering, no intimation of his own mortality. Yet, obviously, if he thought Nan had died at a good age and that she had had it coming, how much more was he and did he? But he appeared quite serene and untroubled.

Both diaries reported that 4 December 1990 was an exceptionally fine, mild, sunny day in north-west England. What a blessing. It made my father's ninetieth-birthday lunch so much easier to organise and all the necessary travelling trouble-free. My brother Gordon and his wife Shirley drove up from Surrey, and my sister Pauline and her husband David from Northamptonshire, without any worries about icy roads or snowstorms. Hunter and I were already in Loweswater, where we'd moved from Caldbeck three years previously, preparing the house for the big event. It only involved seven of us counting my father. It had been agreed that since 4 December fell on a Tuesday, and because the weather could not be depended on, the grandchildren would all telephone but not come up. So it was going to be a small party but the preparations felt immense. Roast beef was called for, best sirloin, a huge piece, or the birthday boy would think nothing of the meal. Roast beef of Old England was what

he wanted, with all the trimmings – roast potatoes, boiled potatoes, boiled cabbage and Brussels sprouts and carrots and, of course, Yorkshire pudding with gravy. My mother (who died in 1981) had made deliciously light Yorkshire puddings. Alas, she had failed to pass the secret on to me but I was going to have to try to imitate hers, or the disappointment – ‘What, no Yorkshire pudding?’ – would ruin the dinner.

I’m not much good at cakes either but luckily a professionally baked and iced cake was not just acceptable but preferred. It gave status. My father only ever ate sponge cake of the variety known as Madeira, and he didn’t like icing, but for his ninetieth the cake must look impressive, so he conceded that iced the cake would have to be in order for his name and age to be written upon it in blue. Cards were of more importance than presents. Cards, to be, in his opinion, real cards, had to have verses, none of this ‘left blank for your own message’ cheating. I’d made mine out of blue cardboard using photographs of him which roughly corresponded to each decade. Arthur, aged twenty, on his motorbike on the Isle of Man (where he went for the TT races); Arthur, aged thirty-one, marrying his mother; Arthur, aged forty, standing by a machine in the Metal Box factory – and so on. And I’d made up doggerel to go with each one which would pass muster, just, as verses. My present was a copy of *The Times* for 4 December 1900. He’d never in his life read *The Times*, but I thought he’d like the idea.

He arrived at midday looking incredibly smart in his best suit and with a sparkling white shirt to go with it and a new blue tie – but then he always looked smart. A little unsteady getting out of my brother’s car but soon upright, trilby hat firmly on, bright blue silk handkerchief peeping out of his jacket pocket, shoes polished to army standards. No beaming smile on his face, however. No. Smiling was always a difficult, faintly embarrassing business. His lips could never learn the trick of opening up into a generous smile. If they attempted to, as they were then trying to, they wavered and quivered, resisting automatically the necessary abandon. But, ‘Grand day,’ he said, and, ‘Champion,’ and he nodded in salutation to each of us. No embraces, no kisses, perish the thought. He stood for a minute surveying Mellbreak, the fell above Crummock Water which soars over our fields. The sun was full on it and every rock, every patch of green, was brilliantly lit. ‘Grand,’ he said again, and then was happy to be led into the conservatory, where the presents lay on the table. He settled himself in a comfortable chair and admired all the (hastily bought) plants but could hardly take his eyes off the view. The fells, usually so bleak at that time of the year, were indeed made soft and beautiful by the nature of the morning’s sunlight and this was the best present of all. We were each thanked for our respective gifts – ‘Thank you now, thank you very much’ – and photographs were allowed. We opened champagne (which he didn’t like but agreed was mandatory for the occasion), and then we trooped through to the kitchen for lunch.

Our table was unrecognisable, its battered wooden surface covered for the first time in its humble life by a rigidly starched pristine white cloth. There was even a linen napkin for each guest, ironed into triangles of geometric precision. There were flowers, blue cornflowers I’d managed to procure with great difficulty, in a crystal bowl (which once belonged to his mother) in the centre. The roast beef, mercilessly overcooked so that not a hint of pink flesh was visible when cut, was lying on a proper platter, a great oval dish of willow-patterned blue and white. The carving knife was for once sharpened to lethal efficiency and my brother carved with suitable skill and authority. The cabbage and Brussels sprouts had been satisfactorily boiled to eliminate any chance of crispness remaining and were piled in sodden heaps in tureens. The potatoes (roast) were browned perfectly and the potatoes (boiled) floury. The carrots, cut into chunks of the prescribed length (two inches), added a touch of robust colour. About the Yorkshire puddings it is better not to speak. I’d made individual ones

thinking I had a better chance of success, and not a single one had risen to the fluffy heights look for. ~~The gravy was in that quaint article called a gravy boat and looked suspiciously thin.~~

We ate. My father ate more than anyone. Gordon gave him three slices of beef and he requested another, to be cut from the top of the joint where the fat was thickest. He relished fat, all kinds of fat and had tortured us for years with his sucking and chewing of it. I gave him two roast potatoes and two boiled, and he said, 'Put another of each on.' He said he would risk a Yorkshire pudding but he might not finish it, and he swamped it with gravy, saying, 'Is this gravy?' I apologised for it and he very kindly said I was not to worry, there was an art to gravy which my mother had possessed and I did not it couldn't be helped. Such generosity. I was overwhelmed. He had seconds of the beef and then, after a short pause, we moved on to ice-cream. It was the only pudding he liked and he liked it plain, plain vanilla. The cake was lifted onto the cleared table and I lit the nine candles and we all sang: 'Happy birthday, dear Arthur, happy birthday to you.'

There was an odd sound. I couldn't at first identify it. As our singing, surprisingly lusty, tailed off there was this strange, compressed noise, half sigh, half groan. My father was weeping. His head was bowed, his shoulders hunched, and he was weeping not extravagantly but quite unnervingly distinctly. Hardly had we all registered this than he had taken out a handkerchief (not the blue one in his suit jacket top pocket which was for show and never to be used, not even in emergencies such as this) and was blowing his nose vigorously. 'Damn silly,' he muttered, and: 'Don't know what's got into him. Ridiculous.' He took his spectacles off and held them up and peered at them, as though they might be to blame for such outrageous behaviour. Shaking his head, he put them back on and said, 'I'll have some more of that ice-cream with a piece of the cake when it's been cut.' I gave him a knife and he cut it, down through the 'A' for Arthur.

So it passed quickly, that one evidence of emotion we had ever seen him give way to. And we allowed it to, we encouraged the swift passing on to mundane matters, as relieved as he was that it was over. My father had never wept. When distressing things had happened – the commonplace tragedies of family life, the illnesses and accidents – he had always just grunted and said, 'Pity.' Even when my mother died he didn't shed any tears before us (though he may well have done in private). He looked stricken, but he didn't weep. In his diary for that day, he wrote, 'Lily died. 7.30 a.m. Sad' – and that was that. All his immense grief was rigidly contained before us. His concern when I went with him to the infirmary to see my mother's dead body was over a missing knife. He hid his distress behind his fury that according to him it had been stolen. This wretched knife was a special knife, fashioned to act as a fork too, made specially for people, like my mother, who had had strokes and could only use one hand. It was not on the list of Patient's Property we were given to sign before my mother's few belongings could be released. One dressing-gown, one pair of slippers, one bed-jacket, six nightdresses, one hairbrush, one comb, one pair of glasses – but no knife. My father was livid. He held this list in a shaking hand and concentrated enough to read out the small print at the bottom: 'I agree that the above list covers all the items deposited by me.' Waving the sheet of paper about he raged. 'It doesn't. There's no knife!' I didn't waste time trying to persuade him that it surely didn't matter where the knife was of no intrinsic value and in any case was only a reminder of a sad disability. I signed myself, without his being aware I'd done so, in the privacy of the sister's office. He left the ward triumphant, convinced he'd stood up for his rights. The energy he'd used up, this forceful display of righteous indignation, had kept any tears at bay.

But now, on his ninetieth birthday, he had wept, if briefly. From happiness, I could only presume. After my mother died, when finally we were leaving him to go back to London, he said to me, 'I suppose I might see you all some time.' It was said as I was leaving his house, as I walked down the

hall to the door, with him behind me. I turned and said, 'Whatever do you mean, you *might* see u *some time*?' He mumbled, 'With your Mam gone ...' 'What difference does that make?' I said sharply. 'For heaven's sake, we'll be coming all the holidays exactly as always.' But his thinking had been painfully obvious: our mother was the one we all loved, she was the draw, and without her we would discard him. We didn't, of course, but if it had gratified him that our attentions had remained the same, he never said so. I imagined that those few tears at his birthday lunch were because he felt valued for himself and perhaps felt fortunate. But perhaps not. Nobody was foolish or brave enough to ask him. His embarrassment was ours and we all conspired to get over it as rapidly as possible with much eating of cake.

The rest of the day passed in a haze of relief – it was over, he was ninety, the great event had taken place, the celebrating had been well and truly done. He sat in the conservatory all afternoon with his binoculars trained on the craggy end of Mellbreak while he followed a particularly huge bird, hoping it would prove to be an eagle (it didn't, it was at the best a buzzard). My sister and her husband took him home, stopping in Cockermouth, where the spire of All Saints was to be lit up in his honour (not anyone else's, if they were prepared to pay for it). It didn't light up very convincingly but my father, unusually, was prepared to be indulgent and told me later on the telephone that it had been a poor show but I was not to mind. In his diary, he wrote: 'Good day. Dry. Sun. 90 year old. At Loweswater for lunch. Margaret cooking good. G & S, D & P, H & M. And me, AF.'

We expected him to shift his sights to a hundred now he'd reached ninety, but he didn't. In fact, he seemed a little puzzled as to how to approach the rest of his life however long it turned out to be. 'I can't go on for ever,' he said, soon after, and I made the smart and silly rejoinder, 'I don't see why not.' It clearly fascinated him wondering how long he could indeed go on for, but meanwhile he carried on conducting his future around the demands of his garden. On 23 April 1991 he sowed three rows of potatoes and two rows of onions to feed himself for that year; on the 30th he planted six new rose bushes: Silver Lining, Tahiti Hybrid Tea, Colour Wonder, Fragrant Cloud, Sutters Gold, and Speraks Yellow. They would take at least three years to establish and flower to his satisfaction. On 1 June he bought a new raincoat 'to see me out'. Considering his old one had lasted twenty-five years this was alarming. Life was clearly continuing as normal and no lack of confidence in it was being betrayed.

We had good outings with him that summer, all recorded as 'smashing'. The best of them were, as ever, to the seaside, to Silloth and Skinburness, lunching at the Skinburness Hotel. There was a special thrill for my father in patronising this hotel, which he thought of as very grand. The manager, an affable fellow, very formally dressed, liked to go round chatting to patrons, and my father liked to chat to him. 'You've been coming here a long time, I gather, Mr Forster?' he said, having been told this by Hunter (who was far too talkative for my father's liking). He grunted. 'You know this place well, do you?' the manager persisted. 'Should do,' my father said. 'Put the boiler in, didn't I? In 1920. No, 1920. Walked with it on my back from Silloth Station, didn't I?' Did he? The manager couldn't know, we couldn't know, but nobody dared dispute it. I actually didn't want to, though it sounded impossible. It conjured up such a magnificent picture: my father, the working man personified, staggering along the sea wall all the way from Silloth, a boiler *on his back*, bowed down with the weight of it, the waves crashing to the left of him, showering him with icy spray, the wind howling all around, threatening to knock him over, but on he goes, arriving at last, drenched and exhausted, at the posh hotel, making his way to the tradesman's entrance and being shown by some disdainful lackey to the boiler room, where he fits the new boiler ... Really? Surely he meant he carried his tools on his

back, or parts for the new boiler, and not an actual boiler? A boiler for an hotel would be enormous; I couldn't have attempted to lift it on his own, never mind carry it. But we all smiled and raised our eyebrows at each another and said nothing. It wasn't so much that we were being condescending, allowing him his unlikely story, as wanting him to be happy with his memory.

And being there did make him happy. He loved the drive there in our comfortable car, especially the moment when we turned off the Silloth road to follow the small winding road that led to the marina and we saw the Solway across it. The landscape is so empty and lonely there, so flat and wide, that the eye can sweep across it uninterrupted until it meets the Scottish hills on the other side of the estuary. We always drove very, very slowly, not at all in a hurry to reach the hotel. But he liked going into the hotel too. Every minute change in its interior decor was noted and commented on – 'Hello! New wallpaper!' – as though it was revolutionary. He preferred eating in the bar (more stories about 1920s but on Sundays he quite liked the thrill of lunching in the dining-room with the sense of occasion that it gave. He approved of its formality, the pale-green linen tablecloths and the crystal goblets and the china plates, but he didn't like the wickerwork chairs, which he said cut into his back. I said they looked pretty, though, and that always started us off on a discussion worthy of William Morris, of comfort versus art, of usefulness versus beauty.

Sometimes our outings were more adventurous. My father liked the old outings but he liked exploring too, especially if there was an object to the exploration. He liked it best of all if we were trying to find some place and got lost. One bitterly cold March day we drove to the Pennines in search of a restaurant we'd read about which was near Alston. He hadn't been anywhere near Alston for decades and he was all excitement as we started on the long climb up to it, reminiscing about how he'd toiled up once on his bike. It began to snow, great swirling clouds of snowflakes billowing around the car. My father loved it. The mild element of possible danger delighted him. 'We might get snowed in,' he said. I winced at the horror of that prospect – snowed in, with my father ... On we went, the snow first lessening, so that we could see perfectly, then sweeping down again in thick gusts of wind so that visibility all but disappeared. It was hard to credit we were going to find any building at all, never mind anything as fancy as a restaurant. We reached Alston and then left it behind, pressing on into even more remote territory, still climbing, still pursued by snow flurries. 'Maybe we should turn back,' I murmured. 'Let's find somewhere to eat in Alston.' 'Turn back?' my father said in tones of outrage. 'After we've come all this way? Don't be daft.' He was so content himself, secure in the front seat of our big car driving through this wild landscape. 'We can't give up,' he said, firmly. 'no good doing that. We'll carry on. We'll find it.'

And we did. A strangely dark house up a lane, the way down to it treacherous. There was no one else in this 'restaurant', which was really just someone's home. But once inside we sat very happily in a shabby, rather artistic sitting-room where there was a huge log fire and the owner, a woman who was both cook and waitress, served us the most delicious meal, steak so tender my father never stopped exclaiming and an array of vegetables of astonishing variety considering the time of year and the obvious fact that they had not been frozen. Her apple pie was sublime, the apples in quarters, firm but not hard, and the pastry light and flaky – oh, how we drooled, even my father who never touched puddings. We drank as well, which may have contributed a good deal to what followed. My father had two pints of beer, which he downed even more quickly than usual, and then, as it was so cold outside, a whisky. 'Grand,' he said, 'and you were going to give up. Never give up. Never-give-up.' 'Thank you, oh wise one,' I said. He sighed with what seemed like true happiness and then suddenly said 'One day soon, I'll just pop off. Pop.' We laughed – it was impossible not to, he had said it in such a droll fashion, making a real popping sound, and he repeated it. 'Pop. I'll just pop off.' It was clear that

is how death seemed to him, a matter of popping off, disappearing in a puff of smoke, all done in a second. He might not understand how this would be managed, but this appeared not to bother him. It would be arranged. All he had to do was what he called 'put my time in'. Life was nothing more than a sentence fixed by a hidden judge and it did not frustrate him not to know its length. It was not his reason why. He had no religious faith whatsoever but that made no difference to his conviction that there was a plan for when he would die.

For a man of ninety years, his health was still good. His experience of doctors had been brief. He first went to his GP in 1916, when he injured his right knee in a motor-bike accident, but then it was eleven years before he troubled the doctor again with what was diagnosed as sciatica. In 1933, he had his ears syringed, in 1939 the doctor paid his first home visit to him when my father had influenza. He had no contact with any doctor during the forties and only one consultation in the fifties, about a sprained ankle. More bouts of flu followed in the sixties, but it was not until the seventies that his medical notes began to need more than two sheets of paper. He had still never been in hospital, though he had been there once for an X-ray. As far as he was concerned he was fine except for arthritis, which began to trouble him in his eighties. He'd had twinges in his hands and feet for years but he wasn't incapacitated by the arthritis as his mother had been. She ended up totally crippled but he remained mobile, helped by some medication. He was constantly on the move, walking a mile a day and gardening in all weathers, which probably also helped. Most winters he had at least one heavy cold always entered in his diary as 'flue', but he didn't count that as being ill. It wasn't actually he who had 'flue' anyway. It was 'A'. Whenever there was anything wrong with him he referred to himself in the third person as 'A' or 'AF' – 'A. got cold', 'A. improving'. And he always did improve, rapidly usually within three days. 'A. in bed' was followed the next day with 'A. up' and then 'A. out. A. OK.' He simply went to bed with a hot-water bottle and a glass of whisky, and stayed there till he felt better, getting up only to go to the bathroom and to open and close the curtains so that nobody would suspect he was ill. Since one of us, his three children, rang every day at six o'clock in the evening he made sure he was briefly up then to take our call and then he retired to bed satisfied he'd fooled us. Afterwards, when he was better, he would tell us he'd been in bed ill and say, triumphantly, 'But I managed.' Managing was the purpose of life. And when he could no longer manage he'd just pop off.

At ninety, he visited his doctor's surgery only to collect his prescription for his arthritis tablets and for some others to do with what he referred to as 'the blood'. In March 1989, he'd broken his record of never having to go into the infirmary but he considered the record still stood because he was only there for a day while he had some kind of exploratory procedure to do with 'the blood'. It was a odd episode about which he was deeply secretive. His diary records the unprecedented fact that he called for his doctor twice in January that year and again in February, and the reason was 'BLOOD' written in capital letters and underlined. The first I knew about his alarm was when he rang me in March to say he had to go into 'that place' for 'an op, or something' but if all went well and he had someone to take him home and stay with him they'd let him out the same day. 'So I don't know what I'm going to do,' he finished in tones of the deepest gloom. I, of course, said I'd come and take him to the infirmary and stay with him. 'I didn't ask you, mind,' he said. Quite. So I went to Carlisle wondering if I dare ring his GP and ask what was going on, only to be greeted on my arrival with 'Don't ask the doctor anything. Don't you interfere. I know what's what.' I wished I did.

He was very nervous on the morning he was due to go for treatment (or investigation). He caught himself shaving, changed his shirt twice, put new laces in his shoes and then broke one tying it up. 'I suppose I'll have to take everything off, likely,' he said, face contorted in anguish at the awful prospect. I said yes, very likely. He sighed and swallowed, and said, 'Can't be helped.' We took a taxi

to the infirmary and he sat staring straight ahead, failing for once to direct the taxi driver as precisely which route he should take. I thought that once we had arrived at the day ward I might get the opportunity to ask what was going to be done to my father, but I couldn't ask in front of him, and after he had been admitted and I was on my own I could find nobody who knew. At any rate, a couple of hours later it, whatever 'it' was, was all over and he had come round from his first anaesthetic quite charmed with the experience. 'Count to ten, they said, and, blow me, I got to four and next thing I was awake and it was done.' We went home with him in high spirits and I cooked him steak because he'd missed his dinner and the anaesthetic, far from leaving him nauseated, had sharpened his already formidable appetite. 'Well, that's that,' he said, when he'd finished eating, 'over and done with. I thought I was a goner.' I wondered if it was all over, whether the problem of 'the blood' had indeed been solved, but since he was not called upon to return and was in due course given some pills to cope with 'the blood' I presumed he was right and whatever was wrong with him hadn't been serious. But it seemed so ridiculous not to know what had happened, though he didn't think so. Ignorance was definitely bliss in health matters as far as he was concerned.

He took his arthritis tablets seriously, never failing to follow the instructions on the bottles. His prescription he regarded as a highly important piece of paper which he handled with something approaching awe. He called it his 'prep' and the handing in of this 'prep' and collecting of the pills entitled him to what was a solemn business. The chemist in Denton Holme got to know him very well. My father would not queue, so if there was even one person waiting when he arrived in the chemist's shop he'd turn round and leave. The chemist would offer him a chair to sit on and say he would only need to wait five minutes at the most, but, no, my father couldn't possibly wait. It was a waste of time. He had all the time in the world, but no, sitting on a chair for a few minutes in a chemist's shop was too much. Sometimes, during the five summer months when we were living at Loweswater and visiting him at least twice a week, he'd give me his 'prep' with instructions to be very, very careful with it and, once I'd handed it over to the chemist, equally careful with the pills he would give me in return. I was also honoured occasionally with the task of collecting the prescription itself from the doctor's surgery. 'You can get my prep,' he'd say, with the air of conferring a great favour – 'Put it straight in your purse, mind, not your pocket, take no chances.' It was a mistake then to make some mocking rejoinder about getting a Securicor guard to accompany me – prescriptions were like gold dust and should be treated as such. They were what kept him independent, or rather gave him access to the means which kept him independent.

There was no doubt at all that as he entered his nineties what made his life precious to him was his independence. He did not want to feel in need of anyone's support or help, not even his children's. He liked to rule his own life, to decide each day exactly what he would do and when and how. It was what gave point to his existence. Activity of one sort or another was the key to the pleasure he still took in life, though pleasure is the wrong word. He never acknowledged doing anything for *pleasure*. Far from frivolous. On the contrary, he was motivated by obligation, by things having to be done with no choice about it. He had to get up every day, didn't he? Well, then. And, once up, he had to wash and shave and dress and eat, didn't he? So. Yet in the carrying out of all these rituals there was pleasure of a kind, even if he denied it. The first thing he did when he got up was to go into his kitchen, open the airing-cupboard door, and switch on the immersion heater for the hot-water tank. He loved this heater which he called 'the merser', and he got definite pleasure from switching it on – click – and he was gratified, his day had begun. He'd wait a moment or two, feeling underneath the lagging round the tank, over which his socks and underclothes were draped to air, until the first faint warmth began and then he'd go back to bed until he reckoned the water would be properly hot enough to shave. A miracle

of science to a man who'd spent half his life boiling water in a kettle if he wanted it hot.

~~He shaved every day, another pleasure, or rather the smooth, clean face afterwards was the~~ pleasure. Beards and moustaches were an abomination, a sign of laziness, slackness, or of being foreign. But then came the real thrill of the day: the Cooked Breakfast. It used to be bacon, egg, sausage and fried bread, but now it was just bacon and toast. Good, thick, fatty bacon, though, from the butcher's in Denton Holme, cut under his own eyes from a big joint and not any of that hopelessly packaged stuff with all its flavour lost inside its plastic shroud. Three slices, fried until the fat oozed, then slammed between two slices of heavily buttered white toast – oh, and a generous dollop of ketchup sauce. He always used the same frying pan and if some of the bacon fat remained after the bacon was lifted out then so much the better. He left it there to congeal and start the next day's bacon off nicely. He took his huge bacon sandwich through to his living-room and sat down to eat it at his table, spread with a tablecloth, keeping up the standards his wife had set. He had his *Daily Express* propped in front of him, leaning against the teapot sporting its woollen cosy. One cup of tea only, strongly brewed with two sugars stirred into it. Grand. It set him up for the day, was the most important part of the day. He never, ever, started any day without his cooked breakfast. On the day the hospital phoned to say his wife had died at seven-thirty that morning he went straight to the kitchen, cooked his bacon and ate it at 8 a.m. as usual, grief-stricken though he was. He had to have his breakfast, didn't he? Yes, he did. There was absolutely no question about it.

Nor was there ever any question about the shape of the rest of the day. Dishes had to be washed almost before he'd finished eating from them, and dried and put away; clothes had to be soaked and scrubbed and then carried through into the garage (in which no car of his own had ever stood), where they had to be put through the mangle, then taken into the garden and pegged onto the clothes line, which then had to be hauled aloft with a long prop; shopping had to be done in Denton Holme, so he was on with his hat and coat and a firm grasp of his walking stick (only for use on such excursions) and off he had to go, at eleven o'clock, in order to get all his messages done and his bets put on and still be home in time for his dinner (bit of cold meat, bit of potato, another cup of tea) at twelve-thirty. Then a rest. A rest was not really in his plan for the day, it was not acknowledged as positively having to be allowed for, but it happened. A rest, a snooze, but only for half an hour, because he had to go into the garden to weed or dig, or cut the grass. In the summer the grass had to be cut every day so that it would not get too much for his old-fashioned mower and his waning strength. Then it was back into the house for his tea (a sandwich) so that he was ready to watch the Six o'Clock News on television and whatever programmes he fancied after that (sport, quizzes, gardening) until nine-thirty, when he had to have his supper (crackers and cheese) and go to bed, where he slept soundly and deeply.

He depended on nobody. What had to be done was done by and for himself. Life, his life, was about functioning on his own. Human contact and involvement were minimal. There was no need for them. He had his good neighbours to say hello to if he wished, he had shopkeepers to exchange the time of day with, he had his regular daily telephone calls from his children to keep him in touch. No friends came to see him. He had never valued friends and wasn't going to start now. His wife had been the one with friends. Every day, when she was alive, there had been someone dropping in, but she died nearly ten years ago and since then his diaries had recorded 'no visitors'. But this was not a complaint, nor was it noted sadly, not yet. If he wanted visitors he knew he could have them, but was still at the stage of not wanting them. They kept him back. They had to be talked to and listened to and finally encouraged to leave if they were the stubborn type. Occasionally, an old friend of his wife's did think she should call in on poor Arthur, all on his own, and would ring up and suggest a visit, only to be told: 'I'm busy.' Should anyone turn up uninvited he was perfectly capable of keeping

them standing on the doorstep until they became discouraged and left and never, of course, came again. The only exceptions to this were children. Anyone with a child was welcome. Then, he became quite sociable and ushered the child in (ignoring the adult). He liked children, especially the under-fives, and they liked him.

What he liked best was playing with them. In his opinion, children didn't need toys. Games could be made out of ordinary household objects and he proceeded to prove this with every visiting small child. Out would come his round, wickerwork peg basket and a pan and he'd start picking pegs out and throwing them into the pan and then, when six or seven had clattered in he'd put a lid on the pan and shake it violently before pouring them out and starting again. Children under three loved this and would immediately start to copy him and he'd cheer extravagantly as each wooden peg landed noisily in the pan. For older ones he had other entertainments. He'd bring out a leather pouch in which he kept old pennies and they were invited to scrutinise each penny, then put it on a pile according to its date and soon they had a row of little towers balancing on the table. There was only one 1900 penny among them and the game was to find it. Then there was his bundle of knotted string which had to be unravelled to see who could get the longest length, and his box of postcards to be sorted into towns and countries, and his photograph albums in which babies now adults had to be identified, and his address book which popped open when each letter of the alphabet was pressed – oh, he was endlessly resourceful.

If these distractions flagged, he'd take the child by the hand into his garage to explore. He'd let them soak a towel in a bucket of water and then stand the child on a stool in front of his aged mangle and help them feed it into the rollers and turn the handle until the water streamed out. Children loved that. The compressing of the towel and the extracting of the water seemed a miracle to them, unmatched by any modern washing machine, and they liked showing off their strength in the turning of the stiff handle, not realising my father was doing most of the turning. The pleasure he derived from their pleasure was visible and extraordinary and it created a bond between him and the children which other adults marvelled at. But his power over them vanished when the children reached puberty, especially the girls. Then he became awkward with them and critical, and he was inclined to label them 'spoiled' and separate himself from them.

This was how his life went on, his routine marking the days out and disturbed only when his family were staying nearby at Loweswater, forty miles away. Hunter and I were there for our five months each summer; Gordon and Shirley for a week in December for his birthday and a week in March; Pauline and David for three weeks at Christmas, two weeks at Easter, a week in October and very often a week in February. The grandchildren came and went for other odd weeks, so that for three quarters of the year he had family visiting regularly. But even then routines had to be observed. No one could call on him before noon – 'I'll be out. Don't bother' – and he didn't like outings or visits on Saturdays – 'It isn't convenient' (i.e. sport on television). He wanted everything organised round his routines and we humoured him, even when his routine didn't fit in with what we wanted. We drove obediently to his favourite places, with him directing. He couldn't read a map but he knew exactly the route he wished to take and it was 'turn right' and 'turn left, then left at the crossroads', until often we had covered a hundred miles and were exhausted but he was in his element. If he misdirected us it was quite likely to be because he intended to – he liked claiming to be lost, because this would extend the drive.

We always stopped for lunch in pubs of his choice, most of them pretty to look at and horrible to eat in. When my mother was alive there was none of this. Then, I would make the lunch in their own

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