1. Knives and Chromosomes

Bertie Pollock (6) was the son of Irene Pollock (37) and Stuart Pollock (40), and older brother of Ulysses Colquhoun Pollock (1). Ulysses was also the son of Irene but possibly not of Stuart, the small boy bearing a remarkable resemblance to Bertie's psychotherapist, recently self-removed from Edinburgh to a university chair in Aberdeen. Stuart, too, had been promoted, having recently been moved up three rungs on the civil service ladder after incurring the gratitude of a government minister. This had happened after Stuart, in a moment of sheer frustration, had submitted the numbers from *The Scotsman*'s Sudoku puzzle to the minister, representing them as likely North Sea oil production volumes. He had immediately felt guilty about this adolescent gesture – *homo ludens*, playful man, might be appreciated in the arts but not in the civil service – and had he been able to retract the figures he would have done so. But it was too late; the minister was delighted with the encouraging projection, with the result that any confession by Stuart would have been a career-terminating event. So he remained silent, and was immensely relieved to discover later that the real figures, once unearthed,

were so close to his Sudoku numbers as to make no difference. His conscience was saved by coincidence, but never again, he said to himself.

Irene had no interest in statistics and always adopted a glazed expression at any mention of the subject. 'I can accept that what you do is very important, Stuart,' she said, in a pinched, rather pained tone, 'but frankly it leaves me cold. No offence, of course.'

Her own interests were focused on psychology – she had a keen interest in the writings of Melanie Klein – and the raising of children. Bertie's education, in particular, was a matter of great concern to her, and she had already written an article for the journal *Progressive Motherhood*, in which she had set out the objectives of what she described as 'the Bertie Project'.

'The emphasis,' she wrote, 'must always be on the flourishing of the child's own personality. Yet this overriding goal is not incompatible with the provision of a programme of interest-enhancement in the child herself' (Irene was not one to use the male pronoun when a feminine form existed). 'In the case of Bertie, I constructed a broad and fulfilling programme of intellectual stimulation introducing him at a very early stage (four months) to the possibilities of theatre, music and the plastic arts. The inability of the very small infant to articulate a response to the theatre, for example, is not an indication of lack of appreciation – far from it, in fact. Bertie was at the age of four months taken to a performance by the Contemporary Theatre of Krakow at the Edinburgh Festival and reacted very positively to the rapid changes of light on the stage. There are many other examples. His response to

Klee, for instance, was noticeable when he was barely three, and by the age of four he was quite capable of distinguishing Peploe from Matisse.'

Some of these claims had some truth to them. Bertie was, in fact, extremely talented, and had read way beyond what one might expect to find in a six-year-old. Most six-year-olds, if they can read at all, are restricted to the doings of Spot the Dog and other relatively unsubtle characters; Bertie, by contrast, had already consumed not only the complete works of Roald Dahl for children, but also half of Norman Lebrecht's book on Mahler and almost seventy pages of Miranda Carter's biography of the late Anthony Blunt. His choice of this reading, which was prodigious on any view, was dependent on what he happened to find lying about on his parents' bookshelves, and this was, of course, the reason why he had also dipped into several volumes of Melanie Klein and was acquainted too with a number of Freud's accounts of his famous cases, especially those of Little Hans and the Wolf Man.

Little Hans struck Bertie as being an entirely reasonable boy, who had just as little need of analysis as he himself had.

'I think Dr Freud shouldn't have worried about that boy Hans,' Bertie remarked to his mother, as they made their way one afternoon to the consulting rooms of Bertie's psychotherapist in Queen Street. 'I don't think there was anything wrong with him, Mummy, I really don't.'

'That's a matter of opinion, Bertie,' answered Irene. 'And actually it's Professor Freud, not Dr Freud.'

'Well,' said Bertie. 'Professor Freud then. Why does he

keep going on about . . . ' He lowered his voice, and then became silent.

'About what, Bertie?' asked Irene. 'What do you think Professor Freud goes on about?'

Bertie slowed his pace. He was looking down at the ground with studious intensity. 'About bo . . . ' he half-whispered. Modesty prevented his completing the sentence.

'About what, Bertie?' prompted Irene. 'We mustn't mumble, *carissimo*. We must speak clearly so that others can understand what we have to say.'

Bertie looked anxiously about him. He decided to change the subject. 'What about my birthday, Mummy?' he said.

Irene looked down at her son. 'Yes, it's coming up very soon, Bertie. Next week, in fact. Are you excited?'

Bertie nodded. He had waited so long for this birthday – his seventh – that he found it difficult to believe that it was now about to arrive. It seemed to him that it had been years since the last one, and he had almost given up on the thought of turning seven, let alone eighteen, which he knew was the age at which one could leave one's mother. That was the real goal – a distant, impossibly exciting, shimmering objective. Freedom.

'Will I get any presents?' he asked.

Irene smiled. 'Of course you will, Bertie.'

'I'd like a Swiss Army penknife,' he half-whispered. 'Or a fishing rod.'

Irene said nothing.

'Other boys have these things,' Bertie pleaded.

Irene pursed her lips. 'Other boys? Do you mean Tofu?'

Bertie nodded miserably.

'Well the less said about him the better,' said Irene. She sighed. Why did men – and little boys too – have to hanker after weapons when they already had their . . . She shook her head in exasperation. What was the point of all this effort if, after years of striving to protect Bertie from gender stereotypes, he came up with a request for a knife? It was a question of the number of chromosomes, she thought: therein lay the core of the problem.

2. Essex Girls et al

From Bertie's point of view his approaching birthday was the cause of immense excitement. Not only was there the issue of presents – although he was virtually reconciled to not getting what he wanted, as his mother had on previous birthdays always been careful to choose gender-neutral gifts – there was also the question of the party Irene had promised him. This was something to which Bertie looked forward with keen anticipation, although he knew that here, too, there would be snares and pitfalls that would require very careful evasive action on his part.

The greatest problem, of course, was the list of those to be invited. If Bertie had his way, the guests would all be boys, as that would mean that they would be able to play the games they wanted without having to take into account the wishes of any girls. Bertie had once been to a party where the guests had played British Bulldog, and he had enjoyed that every bit as much as that other game of rough and tumble, Chase the Dentist. Girls, he had learned, liked neither of these games,

on the grounds that the boys, being rougher and more inclined to push and shove, had a natural advantage over them.

But the list, he knew, could not be an all-boy one, as Irene had made it very clear that she expected an equal number of boy and girl guests.

'There are plenty of nice girls who'd love to come to your party, Bertie,' she assured him. 'There's Olive, obviously, and Olive's friend Pansy. Then there's that pleasant girl Chardonnay, although heaven knows why her parents should saddle her with such a name . . . '

'It sounds rather nice,' said Bertie. 'I think she likes it. And she's got a little sister called Shiraz. That's a nice name too, I think.'

Irene rolled her eyes upwards. 'Such names are . . . well, they're rather closely linked with . . . well, Bertie, I'm sorry to say they are rather closely associated with Essex.'

'Essex?' said Bertie. 'Isn't Essex a place in England, Mummy?'

'Yes it is,' said Irene. 'Unfortunately.'

'What do you mean, Mummy? Are there lots of girls called Chardonnay in Essex, but not in Edinburgh?'

Irene suppressed a smile. 'You could say that, Bertie. Chardonnay is not really an Edinburgh name. But Essex, you see, is a bit . . . It's a bit . . . well, let's not worry about Essex, Bertie. Chardonnay can't help her unfortunate name, and I'm sure that she'll love to come to your party.'

'And there'll be boys too,' said Bertie quickly.

Irene nodded. 'I'm sure that Ranald will be very happy to come.'

'And Tofu.'

Irene made a non-committal noise. 'I thought you found Tofu a bit difficult, Bertie.'

Bertie nodded. 'Yes, he is, Mummy. But I have to invite him. He'd hear about the party and if I didn't invite him, there'd be trouble.'

The conversation about guests continued for some time, but Bertie's mind was not really on it. He was now remembering the party he had attended several weeks earlier, which had been to celebrate Olive's seventh birthday. Bertie had been reluctant to go to this but had been obliged by his mother to accept the invitation. 'You'll enjoy yourself once you're there, Bertie,' she had said. 'I often find that myself when Mummy and Daddy have to go out. We may not be in the mood to begin with, but then we find that we enjoy ourselves quite a lot once we're there. Daddy often finds that.'

Bertie thought about this. 'Is that because he gets drunk, Mummy?'

Irene looked shocked. 'Bertie, you mustn't say things like that. Daddy doesn't get drunk at cocktail parties. Anyway, the point is this: you'll enjoy Olive's party once you're there – you mark my words.'

Bertie did not enjoy himself. When he arrived at Olive's house in the Braids, his heart sank as he saw the cluster of pink balloons tied to the gatepost at the end of the short drive. And it sank even further when he realised that of the twelve guests invited by Olive, he was the only boy.

'Isn't Ranald coming?' he asked Olive as he handed over her present.

'Certainly not,' said Olive. 'Ranald Braveheart Macpherson has not been invited to my house and never will be, with those stupid thin legs of his! No, Bertie, you are the only boy who is privileged to join us today, and you should be jolly grateful for that.'

'Yes,' said Pansy, shaking her finger at him. 'You should know just how lucky you are, Bertie.'

Bertie did not argue. He was outnumbered in every way, and he had long ago learned that arguing with Olive got one nowhere. So he busied himself with a sausage roll and a slice of pizza and waited for events to take their natural course.

After tea, Olive had clapped her hands and announced that it was time for games. 'We're going to play a game now,' she said. 'A really good one.'

'Houses?' asked Pansy. 'Could we play houses, Olive?'

Olive appeared to give this request full consideration before she shook her head. 'No, we shall not play houses, Pansy. Houses is a very yesterday game. We're going to play Jane Austen!'

There were squeals of pleasure and excitement from several of the girls. 'Yes!' enthused Pansy. 'Jane Austen!' And then she asked, 'How do you play that?'

'I'm going to be Lizzie,' said Olive. 'She's a girl with lots of sisters. Pansy, you can be her Mummy, who is very stupid, and Lakshmi, you can be her sister Jane. And Bertie . . . '

Bertie looked away. It was only three o'clock and the party was due to go on until five. Two hours of Jane Austen stretched ahead of him.

'And you, Bertie,' said Olive decisively, 'you can be Mr Darcy.'

'How do I do that?' whispered Bertie. 'I don't know how to play Jane Austen, Olive.'

'You just stand there and be handsome,' said Olive. 'That's all you have to do. And when one of the sisters asks you to dance, then you have to bow and say, "Madam, I would be most honoured, truly I would." That's all. You don't have to say anything else.'

'How long do I have to do that for?' asked Bertie.

'An hour or so,' said Olive. 'Then we're going to play another game. Royal Weddings!'

There were further squeals of excitement, but from Bertie there came only a sigh. Royal Weddings, he felt, was a game that adults played – not children.

3. A Psychiatrist's Daughter

For Pat Macgregor, the mother issue had been of a very different complexion. If Bertie might have been expected to