

If you go back and look at your life there are certain scenes, acts, or maybe just incidents, on which everything that follows seems to depend. If only you could narrate them, then you might be understood. I mean the part of yourself that you don't know how to explain.

It is to do with growing out of strange ground, as if you came from a country almost no one has visited, and no one knows its language and customs or terrain. If I was from Timbuktu I could not be more exotic. Juan once said, 'You're from Atlantis. You're a refugee from a continent that has fallen into the sea.'

These are the reflections of my maturity. Like everyone, I lived life with most intensity when I was young, and I was one of the careless people for whom time was not a dimension.

Most of time is history, but my era was myth. Nobody recorded it because it was so marginal and childish, almost nothing we started came to anything. In our isolated Yorkshire stronghold my friends and I knew with the green force of teenage certainty, the driving fuse of insufferable self-confidence, that human weaknesses like jealousy and personal ambition were going to wither away. Men and women would play their roles in complete equality. War

would be ended by the collective rule of wise female elders, the impulse to fight being some atavistic primitive urge of our forefathers, and our parents were coelacanth, an interim phase in the evolution of the species. There would be an end to vanity, mirrors would fall into disuse, clothes would be no more than individual costumes, fashion would cease as time came to a standstill. The present would become the eternal now. When we died our bodies would be reincarnated as trees.

Eddie says, 'Interesting. The dope must have been very different back then.'

The sense of the past bricked up is more than us not having computers, mobile phones, YouTube, Wikipedia, gaming joysticks, iPads. *Obviously* our youth was like the primitive tribes of the Amazon when it came to gadgets, but it was what was in our heads that the next generation just can't comprehend, and how we tormented each other with our moral certainties. How our values were made up of *ought* and *should*, and how we hammered each other to death with them.

Of course all this is hippie gobbledegook. It's Evie that I don't know how to explain and about whom I have still not worked out a way of speaking. Evie, a more primal question. More intimate and more painful. I rarely come across any Evies; Eves, yes, of course, but 'Evie' still has the capacity to give me an electric shock, attached as it permanently is to one individual. As for her brother, I have had to get used to her face embedded in his. Nineteen-year-old Evie reveals herself in his pale blue eyes, occluded now by cataracts, the bags of flesh below them, the cantankerous mouth. But there she is. There she is.

How to tell it? To start with, I was born in Liverpool, sea city. Liners, docks, salt wind, Beatles, African seamen, Nigerian Friendship Society, the American Bar. I'm the product of people with tricky back-stories that take a lot of time to explain and anything you have to explain is always open to suspicion. But the story, in my view, is everything.

I remember how my father lifted me on his shoulders, I remember being a giant walking through the streets of the city, my fists raised up, past Lewis's, past the naked statue, down through town to the pierhead where the ships came and my father carrying me all that way. His chest was strong and I was safe and stable, exulting in the light rain.

We went down on to a ship and the ship sailed across the water and we reached the other side, where there was a beach, tin buckets and spades, paper flags, a funfair, ice cream, candy floss, toffee apples, and I was sick.

In all his extravagance we took a taxi home through the Mersey Tunnel. Strips of amber light lining the blackness, head in Daddy's lap. Talking to the taxi driver. 'The kid's eyes are

bigger than her stomach. She emptied it on the floor of a dodgem car.'

'She won't make that mistake twice.'

'Until the next time, eh, bubbsy?' He stroked my black hair. I was in a kind of heaven for which it was worth feeling nauseous.

My father's best friend from childhood was Yankel Fishoff, whom he stuck with through thick and thin because 'the Fishoffs were the poorest of the poor, no shoes when they went to school, a rind of thick yellow skin on their feet and in the winter the skin was blue and a rind of ice'.

Dad was not an aesthete – take him to the racetrack, not a gallery or concert hall – but he had a hell of a lot of respect for artists. It was not the art they made that impressed him, but the life they had to lead to make it. They were crazy and reckless and that was something he knew. Yankel was homosexual and a painter, which was a major something when you came out of the immigrant communities of Brownlow Hill and Toxteth. Daddy was in awe of Yankel's skills with a paintbrush, his struggle for recognition, his love of the Impressionists. His work was exuberant, poetic, had a vitality that came from being a serious student of Rembrandt and Velázquez, freed from academicism by loose brushwork. His subjects were couples dancing, boys playing, Moroccan markets and Brighton beaches. All human life was there, he had a flair for depicting people living, not thinking. Ringo Starr was a collector.

Yankel told me to go and look at pictures. For my birthday he gave me a book about Michelangelo called *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. That book made a huge impression on me. I dreamed of popes and painters and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. As soon as I'd finished it I went crying to Yankel for another book. Next he gave me *Lust for Life* by the same author. This one was about Van Gogh and now the sky became molten and a simple chair was the world.

I wanted desperately to be a painter but I had no hand-eye co-

ordination. Only messes came from my brush. I had tantrums and threw paints across the room when they wouldn't do what I wanted, sienna yellow spattering the skirting boards.

'Never mind, minxy,' said Yankel. 'You grow up into somebody. That's for definite.'

My father said of Yankel and also of Yankel's friend, Brian Epstein, that it took guts to be gay in Liverpool in the forties and fifties, to some extent too you had to be a tough character, or you needed some *shtarker* friends to protect you, men with fists. My father was Yankel's personal *shtarker*. Dad was out nights carousing with his buddies, down to Yankel's underground speakeasy, or to the casino or to any destination with neon lights. On these evenings my mother, relieved at the rest from my father's overbearing personality, served for dinner a bowl of soup and a slice of packaged white bread and butter.

'Is that all?' My little voice breaking into tears.

My father was life, vitality, central heating turned on, platters of grilled chops and Waldorf salad and fancy chocolates in boxes tied with a ribbon. He never came home without something in his pocket. On their wedding anniversary, my mother got florists' bouquets of roses and at the bottom a bunch of sweet peas for me. *To my darling Adele*. I was in love with him, the great passion of the life of a five-year-old.

From my father I learned that when men were around there was more of everything, more luxury and abundance, and that women had to learn forbearance in the face of their big appetites, and manage the domestic economy.

'Don't you dare throw that soup on the floor,' said my mother.

'I will, *I will!* I want Daddy!'

She snatched it from me.

'You'll eat it, if I have to ram it down your throat.'

'I won't eat it.'

'Good, then starve.'

She didn't mean it, she was sick to death of my love affair with Daddy.

Late that night when I was sleeping I was woken by the sound of the doorbell. Daddy had forgotten his keys again. Through the banisters, under the Toby jugs, Daddy had his arm round Yankel and Yankel's face was all blood.

'Get a wet cloth, Edna, and some bandages. He's hurt.'

'What happened this time?' my mother said.

'Don't ask,' said my father. 'It's not women's business. And a cup of tea would be nice. Have we got any crackers and cheese?'

'In the soup again,' said Yankel through a thick tongue. 'Will I never learn?'

'You shouldn't go down the dock road, it's just asking for trouble,' my mother said. 'Can't you find someone nice?'

'From your mouth to God's ears.'

The time on my Alice in Wonderland clock read twenty to one. I went to the window and looked out on to the dark yew trees. The moon was above the rooftops of number 67. With only the luminous hands of the clock and Alice's luminous eyes to light my bedroom, for the first time in my life I experienced the sensation of *déjà vu*. I had it a lot in my childhood, not now, not for many, many years. Strange pictures came and went in my mind, elves and goblins playing on the eiderdown, fairies bouncing together, holding hands, using my bed as a trampoline. A red-eyed miniature zebra trotted over the ottoman. I began to scream.

Mummy came up. 'What's the matter, bubbsy baby? Did you fall out of bed again?'

'Is Uncle Yankel better?'

'What do you mean?'

'Did you make him better with Elastoplast?'

'What is the child talking about?' she said as if I wasn't there.

'His face was hurt.'

'Don't be silly. When did you see his face hurt?'

'Just *now*. He's downstairs.'

'There's no one here, just us, Daddy isn't even home yet. It's early. Look at the clock.'

And the clock's hands showed ten past nine.

'Daddy will come in and give you a kiss when he gets home. I'll make sure of it.'

As an adult I have tried and failed to make sense of this memory. I keep it by me. The little girl who created it is special. I refuse to allow her to be undone by encrusting time. She once twirled around the kitchen in dizzying circles until she was sick, she wanted me never to forget when I was grown-up what it was to be a child, to be smaller than everyone, to be made to do what you don't want to do, to see with such clarity how life is *not fair*. How eggs made her retch, and Struwwelpeter frightened her, and that according to *The Woodentops* clothes pegs could come to life, and that weird men lived in flowerpots, weeds could squeak a bit and Daddy's knee was heaven on earth.

I now suspect my mother's finger was on Alice's arms.

The fate of the only child in the time before daytime television was to have hobbies or read. I had no craft skills at all, so reading is what I did. I read a lot and I read it all very fast. I went way beyond my years. I read Hemingway under the desk at school instead of the set texts, *Black Beauty* and *Lorna Doone*. I got the school prize for an essay on *A Moveable Feast*.

I grew up to be the leader of a circle of schoolgirls, bolshy, sophisticated, ambitious, supercilious, a little bit cynical already, who smoked and wore plum-coloured lipstick and very short skirts.

We were fairly clever, though none of us ostentatiously so. We sneered at swots and nose grinders. We handed in our work carelessly and still got good marks. We didn't care what the teachers thought. We read everything that was new and particularly everything that was forbidden. Bought every Stones and Beatles record from NEMS on the day of release, quoted Dylan lyrics at each other, queued to buy mini-dresses at Chelsea Girl, sent away for a ten-shilling feather boa from *Honey* magazine, could recite by heart 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. Ran through Sefton Park to the Palm House and kissed boys on the swings. Drank half-pints of Double Diamond at the Phil and O'Connors Tavern,



wrote poetry, stayed up on school nights to watch *Late Night Line-up*. Could tell the difference between Peter Brook and Peter Hall. Went on the Pill to prepare ourselves for the future amazements of living.

Daddy got caught in some kind of very basic Ponzi scheme involving the sale of chamois leathers and hanged himself with his best silk tie while on bail. He did it in the spare room, knocking off a silk lampshade with his dangling feet.

I imagine that this is what an earthquake or a tsunami is like. One minute you're lying on the beach drinking a piña colada under a sun umbrella, the next the whole bed of the ocean is covering your face. Or you're standing in a door frame watching everything shaking and rooms going down like card-houses. When it stops, you wander around in a biblical way, in the ruins, rending your garments.

Out has gone the sun, the land is in darkness. *No Daddy!*

My father ate an apple like this. He munched around the circumference and then pecked at the remaining rim. He cut an orange in fours and mouthed the flesh from the skin. He did not believe in peeling. 'All the goodness is on the outside, that's where the vitamins are.' How is it even *possible* that a personality as large as his could just be turned off like a light switch?

And everything that we had – Mummy's diamond earrings, the suits in Daddy's wardrobe, the silk ties, the books in my bookcase, the china horse's-head bookends, the lipsticks, the mini-skirts, the rose wallpaper on the landing, the swinging seat in the garden, the Timex watch on my wrist – all paid for by gambling and deception and crime. 'Why not?' Daddy said when the police arrived. 'Why not take from those who hate us? I know you, Inspector Ferris, I know you from Hackins Hey. You're a bastard and an anti-Semite. I'll swing for you.'

'Shut up, Harry!' cried my mother. 'You want to bring more trouble down on our heads?'

She ran down the road after the police car in her velvet

Mallorcan mules. When she came back, she said, ‘Adele, things are going to be very different from now on, but look round you at everything your father gave us. He did everything for you, he worshipped you, you were all he lived for. Never forget it. It was always for his family.’

Yankel Fishoff at the funeral dressed in a black Crombie overcoat with velvet collar, black brocade waistcoat, white shirt and polished Chelsea boots.

‘Look at the poof,’ said one of her friends. ‘Who does he think he is, Count Dracula?’

But my mother, turning on her from beneath her black hat, the black hat she borrowed from Lily Eisen who had buried two husbands and a son-in-law, the sorrows of the world weighing down the brim of that hat, said, ‘Look at *your* husband, what a *shloch*, did you not dress him this morning? What’s a wife for but to dress her husband? He’s like something out of Paddy’s market. In my opinion it’s very nice to see a man who makes an effort. Old men lose interest, if they ever had any, in how they look, but Yankel is always beautifully turned out.’

‘How can you think of clothes at a time like this?’

‘You wait, you’ll see what life has in store for you.’ And the brim came down over her eyes.

I saw my father go into the ground. His brother Irving, estranged since the arrest, cried histrionically. He shook his fist at heaven. ‘I remember him when he was a little boy, a little boy, I tell you! My brother, my brother. I was with him in Reece’s tea room when a car backfired on the street and my heart turned over in my chest, I thought it was guns, I thought I was in the army again and I broke down in tears. Harry put his arms round me, two grown men over a pot of tea and buttered teacakes, sobbing. That was the kind of brother he was to me.’

Everyone was claiming him for their own, all the rancour at his crimes was gone, my mother was looking at the box in the earth: ‘Harry, Harry.’

‘Adele,’ said Yankel, ‘you haven’t shed a tear.’

'What's going to happen to us? How are we going to live?'

'You'll live, don't worry.'

'But I don't understand.'

'What's to understand, minxy? What's to know?'

'Where is he? Where's he gone?'

'Beats me.'

'Who is going to look after us, me and Mummy? The lights have all gone out. I can't see.'

'I know what you mean, he was a big personality.'

The stone broke in my chest. The rabbi wailed, my mother and her friends stood as his weeping chorus in their hats and high-heeled shoes. Oh, Daddy, you were the light of my life and I was supposed to be the light of *yours*. Why did you do this to me?

Early the next morning, when the dawn was over the street and the lamps out there burned then fizzled, Yankel walked along the pavement, his Cuban heels clicking up the crazy-paving path to the front door, and my mother was dressed in her peony housecoat and bare legs, slippers on her bare feet. I heard the doorbell ring, I heard them go out into the garden through the kitchen door and there they were, figures in the flowerbeds burying the ormolu clock and her jewels and, deep in the ground, wrapped in a plastic bag, her fur coat. I never saw such a slightly built woman dig with such strength and frenzy or an artist take to the spade with such perspiration and shout, 'What else needs going in, Edna?'

Our family was now under the rose bushes.

Yankel lifted a hammer and smashed a side window. Next door, Mr Hallows, the dentist, looked out of his window and saw the broken glass.

'She's been robbed!' cried Yankel.

Mr Hallows chased down the street in his pyjamas looking for the thugs, the hooligans, all the way down to the park, looking behind dustbins in case they were hiding and when he returned Yankel said, 'Poor Edna, she has the worst luck in the world. I'll call the police.'

We got a lot of money on the insurance. When you don't have

time to think, you have to think, you keep your emotions in check. You do what you must do.

Me, I was walking through fog. Monsters jumped out at me, there was something new every day. I used to go and look at myself in the full-length mirror in my parents' bedroom to make sure that I was still there because Adele was disappearing. Adele was a punctured balloon. Was anything left of Adele? The books were still in the bookcase. The Biba plum lipstick was still in the drawer of the dressing table. My copy of *The Female Eunuch* – bought in hard-back, mind you, with a birthday book token – was still by the bed, half finished, full of underlinings. My dresses still hung in the wardrobe. And I'm pfffttt inside. Tiny ball of hurt, anger, longing, resentment, fear, expanding to fill the dark void left by Daddy's leaving me.

'Don't you dare crack up on me, Adele,' said my mother. 'I haven't got time to look after you. I've got too much on my plate. We're going to have to face this together, do you understand? Don't let me down. Stop crying. Don't pull that face. From now on things are going to be different, very different. Do you understand?'

My mother's friends rallied round her, all those big 'aunties' with their dyed hair and tight satin clothes who rang the doorbell bearing food and prescription medicines they poured out from their pill bottles. 'Take this, it'll pick you up in no time.' All their heads together round the morning-room table, a confederation of women who had come up together from the terraced houses of the city centre, the warmth of the old iron stoves, remembering with laughter their rayon dresses and hair piled on their heads beneath wartime turbans.

This was their world, the world of women and their no-good men, the bastards and the *schlemiels*, and their hysterectomies and pawned diamond rings, and cancers growing in their breasts and wombs. Their red-painted nails. They were hawks and eagles with talons, proud, dignified. Hair dye and lipstick were their war paint and armour.

'Life is hard, Adele. Now you've learned that, dolly. You've had

the best that money can buy, but you're going to have to put your books away and start earning money.'

'I was out to work at fourteen, I was in the wages office of the munitions factory where they made the bombs.'

'I was behind the counter weighing an ounce of cheese.'

'I was engaged to a wonderful GI and we were going to go to California but he never came back from the war.'

'I had to look after my mother when my brother was killed in Italy, he was in the tanks, he was a lovely brother to me. I miss him terribly.'

And I sat there, listening to these middle-aged women in whose solidarity I could see nothing to admire, full of rage at my father for what he had done to me. I didn't want to belong where he had left me, down here amongst the women.

After the insurance paid out, my mother dug up the valuables and we moved to a flat off Linnet Lane; such sweet birdsong names these roads had, Lark, near Linnet.

'Now you,' said my mother, 'are going to have to start earning your keep.'

'What do you mean?'

'Why do you need to stay on at school? Who needs qualifications? You'll be married, I hope, in a couple of years. There are some very nice boys out there, boys with money. The Rosenblatts are loaded, one of the Rosenblatt boys would be perfect, we could be back on top of the world in no time.'

'Are you mad? I'm never getting married.'

'What do you mean? Of course you're getting married, everyone gets married, apart from the poor souls no one wants. You just need to put your mind to it.'

'You don't understand. Daddy did, and Uncle Yankel.'

'What's to understand? A girl gets married, like her mother and her grandmother before her. Even if he turns out no good, you still need a ring on your finger.'

'Oh, *Mother*.'

'Don't use that word with me. Who do you think I am?'

‘My mother!’

‘You little know-it-all. You could get a Saturday job, for a start. Bring in a wage, every little helps. That’s right, flounce off in a huff! You’ll see, believe me, you’ll see.’

I was spoiled, I was insufferable, I was grieving and didn’t know how because all the rituals of grief I had rejected as hopeless bourgeois relics of another generation. Teenagers aren’t supposed to need to grieve, we’re designed to be obnoxious. And crying in my room, my little box room overlooking a brick wall. A brick fuck-ing wall.

But before I knew it one of the ‘girls’, my mother’s army of girls, got me a Saturday job in Lee’s on the perfume counter. Rose, iris, jasmine, geranium, the chemical explosion of Chanel No. 5 hung around my clothes like blood in an abattoir or the dust of coalmines. All the other saleswomen were older ladies. ‘You’ve got a beautiful speaking voice, did you do elocution? You know you could get on the training scheme, you could go into management.’

I hated my life. I hated Yardley and Blue Grass. They were turning me into a ghost, a remnant. I was something you could spray into the air.

Out of the window people passed up and down the street on their various business and I was imprisoned by a till and a pile of paper bags with a punch card and a packet of Luncheon Vouchers.

‘So now you know,’ said my mother, ‘how the old world works. Have you met any Rosenblatts yet?’

After the threat of the Rosenblatt boys, my only ambition was to make myself unattractive to as many of them as possible. To be sullen, to be damaged goods, to be seen walking down Bold Street with a boy with red hair down his back, wearing a see-through Perspex coat in the pockets of which you could see his cigarette-rolling machine, his leaky pens, snotty Kleenex. Vince from Maghull had the catarrhal voice of this dirty, windy sea city where the weather was always fresh, meaning cold winds blowing across the Atlantic.

No one knew what to do with me, it was out of control. I took

days off school to ride the ferry across the river and spend a day on the dirty beach eating ice creams and sitting on the swings. I went to Yankel to ask him for a job in his nightclub. 'You go back to school, minxy. It's what your father would have wanted.'

'If he'd cared about what I wanted he'd never have done this to me.'

'I know, but your father only wanted the world for his family. If he couldn't earn it honestly, then he just went ahead and did the best he could another way. That was Harry, he was what he was.'

'I hate him.'

'No you don't. Go back to school, learn your lessons. I'd have loved to have had an education, I never even went to art school.'

But whatever anyone else wanted for me, I refused to do it. And then was surprised when I got two Cs and a D in my A levels.

'You cut off your nose to spite your face,' said my mother. 'You'll have to marry a rich boy now, won't you?'