A Life Like Other People's

Alan Bennett

Published by Faber and Faber and Profile Books

Extract

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in 2005 in *Untold Stories*
This edition first published in 2009
by Faber and Faber Ltd
Bloomsbury House, 74–77 Great Russell Street,
London WC1B 3DA

and

Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street, Exmouth Market
London EC1R 0JH

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd
Printed in England by Mackays of Chatham plc

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–24812–4

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

There is a wood, the canal, the river, and above the river the railway and the road. It's the first proper country that you get to as you come north out of Leeds, and going home on the train I pass the place quite often. Only these days I look. I've been passing the place for years without looking because I didn't know it was a place; that anything had happened there to make it a place, let alone a place that had something to do with me. Below the wood the water is deep and dark and sometimes there's a boy fishing or a couple walking a dog. I suppose it's a beauty spot now. It probably was then.

'Has there been any other mental illness in your family?' Mr Parr's pen hovers over the Yes/No box on the form and my father, who is letting me answer the questions, looks down at his trilby and says nothing.

'No,' I say confidently, and Dad turns the trilby in his hands.

'Anyway,' says Mr Parr kindly but with what the three of us know is more tact than truth, 'depression isn't really mental illness. I see it all the time.'

Mr Parr sees it all the time because he is the Mental Health Welfare Officer for the Craven district, and late this September evening in 1966 Dad and I are sitting in his bare linoleum-floored office above Settle police station while he takes a history of my mother.

'So there's never been anything like this before?'

'No,' I say, and without doubt or hesitation. After all, I'm the educated one in the family. I've been to Oxford. If there had been 'anything like this' I should have known about it. 'No, there's never been anything like this.'

'Well,' Dad says, and the information is meant for me as much as for Mr Parr, 'she did have something once. Just before we were married.' And he looks at me apologetically. 'Only it was nerves more. It wasn't like this.'

The 'this' that it wasn't like was a change in my mother's personality that had come about with startling suddenness. Over a matter of weeks she had lost all her fun and vitality, turning fretful and apprehensive and inaccessible to reason

or reassurance. As the days passed the mood deepened, bringing with it fantasy and delusion; the house was watched, my father made to speak in a whisper because there was someone on the landing, and the lavatory (always central to Mam's scheme of things) was being monitored every time it was flushed. She started to sleep with her handbag under her pillow as if she were in a strange and dangerous hotel, and finally one night she fled the house in her nightgown, and Dad found her wandering in the street, whence she could only be fetched back into the house after some resistance.

Occurring in Leeds, where they had always lived, conduct like this might just have got by unnoticed, but the onset of the depression coincided with my parents' retirement to a village in the Dales, a place so small and close-knit that such bizarre behaviour could not be hidden. Indeed it was partly the knowledge that they were about to leave the relative anonymity of the city for a small community where 'folks knew all your business' and that she would henceforth be socially much more visible than she was used to ('I'm the centrepiece here') that might have brought on the depression in the first place. Or so Mr Parr is saying.

Mam and Dad in the back garden, 1966

My parents had always wanted to be in the country and have a garden. Living in Leeds all his life Dad looked back on the childhood holidays he had spent holidays on a farm at Bielby in the East Riding as a lost paradise. The village they were moving to was very pretty, too pretty for Mam in her depressed mood: 'You'll see,' she said, 'we'll be inundated with folk visiting.'

The cottage faced onto the village street but had a long garden at the back, and it seemed like the place they had always dreamed of. This was in 1966. A few years later I

wrote a television play, *Sunset Across the Bay*, in which a retired couple not unlike my parents leave Leeds to go and live in Morecambe. As the coach hits the M62, bearing them away to a new life, the wife calls out, 'Bye bye, mucky Leeds!' And so it had seemed. Now Dad was being told that it was this longed-for escape that had brought down this crushing visitation on his wife. Not surprisingly he would not believe it.

In their last weeks in Leeds Dad had put Mam's low spirits down to the stress of the impending upheaval. Once the move had been accomplished, though, the depression persisted so now he fell back on the state of the house, blaming its bare unfurnished rooms, still with all the decorating to be done.

'Your Mam'll be better when we've got the place straight,' he said. 'She can't do with it being all upset.' So, while she sat fearfully on a hard chair in the passage, he got down to the decorating.

My brother, who had come up from Bristol to help with the move, also thought the state of the house was to blame, fastening particularly on an item that seemed to be top of her list of complaints, the absence of stair-carpet. I think I

knew then that stair-carpet was only the beginning of it, and indeed when my brother galvanised a local firm into supplying and fitting the carpet in a couple of days Mam seemed scarcely to notice, the clouds did not lift, and in due course my brother went back to Bristol and I to London.

Over the next ten years this came to be the pattern. The onset of a bout of depression would fetch us home for a while, but when no immediate recovery was forthcoming we would take ourselves off again while Dad was left to cope. Or to care, as the phrase is nowadays. Dad was the carer. We cared, of course, but we still had lives to lead: Dad was retired – he had all the time in the world to care.

'The doctor has put her on tablets,' Dad said over the phone, 'only they don't seem to be doing the trick.' Tablets seldom did, even when one saw what was coming and caught it early. The onset of depression would find her sitting on unaccustomed chairs – the cork stool in the bathroom, the hard chair in the hall that was just there for ornament and where no one ever sat, its only occupant the occasional umbrella. She would perch in the passage, dumb with misery and apprehension, motioning me not

to go into the empty living room because there was someone there.

'You won't tell anybody?' she whispered.

'Tell anybody what?'

'Tell them what I've done.'

'You haven't done anything.'

'But you won't tell them?'

'Mam!' I said, exasperated, but she put her hand to my mouth, pointed at the living-room door and then wrote TALKING in wavering letters on a pad, mutely shaking her head.

As time went on these futile discussions would become less intimate (less caring even), the topography quite spread out, with the parties not even in adjoining rooms. Dad would be sitting by the living-room fire while Mam hovered tearfully in the doorway of the pantry, the kitchen in between empty.

'Come in the pantry, Dad,' she'd call.

'What for? What do I want in the pantry?'

'They can see you.'

'How can they see me? There's nobody here.'

'There is, only you don't know. Come in here.'

It didn't take much of this before Dad lapsed into a weary silence.

'Oh, whish't,' he'd say, 'be quiet.'

A play could begin like this, I used to think – with a man on stage, sporadically angry with a woman off stage, his bursts of baffled invective gradually subsiding into an obstinate silence. Resistant to the off-stage entreaties, he continues to ignore her until his persistent refusal to respond gradually tempts the woman into view.

Or set in the kitchen, the empty room between them, no one on stage at all, just the voices off. And what happens when they do come on stage? Violence, probably.

It was all so banal. Missionary for her sunless world, my mother was concerned to convince us in the face of all vehement denial that sooner or later she would be taken away. And of course she was right.

Her other fears . . . of being spied on, listened to, shamed and detected . . . were ordinary stuff too. This was not the territory of grand delusion, her fears not decked out in the showy accoutrements of fashionable neurosis. None of Freud's patients hovered at pantry doors; Freud's *selected* patients, I always felt, the ordinary not getting past, or even

to, the first consultation because too dull, the final disillusion to have fled across the border into unreason only to find you are as mundane mad as you ever were sane.

Certainly in all her excursions into unreality Mam remained the shy, unassuming woman she had always been, none of her fantasies extravagant, her claims, however irrational they might be, always modest. She might be ill, disturbed, mad even, but she still knew her place.

It may be objected that madness did not come into it; that, as Mr Parr had said, this was depression and a very different thing. But though we clung to this assurance, it was hard not to think these delusions mad and the tenacity with which she held to them, defended them, insisted on them the very essence of unreason. While it was perhaps naïve of us to expect her to recognise she was ill, or that standing stock still on the landing by the hour together was not normal behaviour, it was this determination to convert you to her way of thinking that made her behaviour hardest to bear.

'I wouldn't care,' Dad said, 'but she tries to get me on the same game.' Not perceiving her irrationalities as symptoms, my father had no other remedy than common sense.

'You're imagining stuff,' he would say, flinging wide the wardrobe door. 'Where is he? Show me!'

The non-revelation of the phantom intruder ought, it seemed to Dad, to dent Mam's conviction, persuade her that she was mistaken. But not a bit of it. Putting her finger to her lips (the man in the wardrobe now having mysteriously migrated to the bathroom), she drew him to the window to point at the fishman's van, looking at him in fearful certainty, even triumph; he must surely see that the fate she feared, whatever it was, must soon engulf them both.

But few nights passed uninterrupted, and Dad would wake to find the place beside him empty, Mam scrabbling at the lock of the outside door or standing by the bedroom window looking out at a car in the car park that she said was watching the house.

How he put up with it all I never asked, but it was always this missionary side to her depression, the aggressiveness of her despair and her conviction that hers was the true view of the world that was the breaking point with me and which, if I were alone with her, would fetch me to the brink of violence. I once nearly dragged her out of the house to confront an elderly hiker who was sitting on the wall oppo-

site, eating his sandwiches. He would have been startled to have been required to confirm to a distraught middle-aged man and his weeping mother that his shorts and sandals were not some subtle disguise, that he was not in reality an agent of . . . what? Mam never specified. But I would have seemed the mad one and the brute. Once I took her by the shoulders and shook her so hard it must have hurt her, but she scarcely seemed to mind. It just confirmed to her how insane the world had become.

'We used to be such pals,' she'd say to me, shaking her head and refusing to say more because the radio was listening, instead creeping upstairs to the cold bedroom to perch on one of the flimsy bedroom chairs, beckoning me to stay silent and do the same as if this were a satisfactory way to spend the morning.

And yet, as the doctor and everybody else kept saying, depression was not madness. It would lift. Light would return. But when? The young, sympathetic doctor from the local practice could not say. The senior partner whom we had at first consulted was a distinguished-looking figure, silver-haired, loud-talking, a Rotarian and pillar of the community. Unsurprisingly he was also a pull your socks

up merchant and did not hold with depression. At his happiest going down potholes to assist stricken cavers, he was less adept at getting patients out of their more inaccessible holes.

How long such depressions lasted no doctor was prepared to say, nor anyone else that I talked to. There seemed to be no timetable, this want of a timetable almost a definition of the disease. It might be months (the optimistic view), but one of the books I looked into talked about years, though what all the authorities did seem agreed on was that, treated or not, depression cleared up in time. One school of thought held that time was of the essence, and that the depression should be allowed to run its course unalleviated and unaccelerated by drugs. But on my mother drugs seemed to have no effect anyway, and if the depression were to run its course and it did take years, many months even, what would happen to my father?

Alone in the house, knowing no one in the village well enough to call on them for help, he was both nurse and gaoler. Coaxing his weeping parody of a wife to eat, with every mouthful a struggle, then smuggling himself out of the house to do some hasty shopping, hoping that she

would not come running down the street after him, he spent every day and every fitful night besieged by Mam's persistent assaults on reality, foiling her attempts to switch off the television, turn off the lights or pull the curtains against her imaginary enemies, knowing that if he once let her out of his sight she would be scrabbling at the lock of the front door trying to flee this house which was both her prison and her refuge.

Thus it was that after six weeks of what Dad called 'this flaming carry-on' it was as much for his sake as for hers that the doctor arranged that she should be voluntarily admitted to the mental hospital in Lancaster.

Lancaster Moor Hospital is not a welcoming institution. It was built at the beginning of the nineteenth century as the County Asylum and Workhouse, and seen from the M6 it has always looked to me like a gaunt grey penitentiary. Like Dickens's Coketown, the gaol might have been the infirmary and the infirmary the gaol. It was a relief, therefore, to find the psychiatric wing where Mam was to be admitted not part of the main complex but a villa, Ridge Lee, set in its own grounds, and as we left Mam with a nurse

in the entrance hall that September morning it seemed almost cheerful. Dad was not uncheerful too, relieved that now at any rate something was going to be done and that 'she's in professional hands'. Even Mam seemed resigned to it, and though she had never been in hospital in her life she let us kiss her goodbye and leave without protest.

It was actually only to be goodbye for a few hours, as visiting times were from seven to eight and though it was a fifty-mile round trip from home Dad was insistent that we would return that same evening, his conscientiousness in this first instance setting the pattern for the hundreds of hospital visits he was to make over the next eight years, with never a single one missed and agitated if he was likely to be even five minutes late.

I had reached early middle age with next to no experience of mental illness. At Oxford there had been undergraduates who had had nervous breakdowns, though I never quite believed in them and had never visited the Warneford Hospital on the outskirts of the city where they were usually consigned. Later, teaching at Magdalen, I had had a pupil, an irritating, distracted boy who would arrive two hours late for tutorials or ignore them altogether, and when he did

turn up with an essay it would be sixty or seventy pages long. When I complained about him in pretty unfeeling terms one of the Fellows took me on one side and explained kindly that he was 'unbalanced', something that had never occurred to me though it was hard to miss. Part of me probably still thought of neurosis as somehow 'put on', a way of making oneself interesting – the reason why when I was younger I thought of myself as slightly neurotic.

When I was seventeen I had had a friend a few years older than me who, I realise when I look back, must have been schizophrenic. He had several times gone through the dreadful ordeal of insulin-induced comas that were the fashionable treatment then, but I never asked him about it, partly out of embarrassment but also because I was culpably incurious. Going into the army and then to university, I lost touch with him, and it was only in 1966, on the verge of leaving Leeds, that I learned that he had committed suicide.

I went to the funeral at St Michael's, Headingley, the church where in our teens we had both been enthusiastic worshippers. Every Friday night a group of us gathered in the chancel to say the office of Compline with, at the heart of it, Psalm 91: 'Thou shalt not be afraid for any

terror by night: nor for the arrow that flieth by day. A thousand shall fall beside thee,' we sang, 'and ten thousand at thy right hand: but it shall not come nigh thee.' Now it had, and as the remnants of our group stood awkwardly outside the church, I reflected that he was the first person of our generation to have died. Oddly it was my mother who was most upset, far more so than her acquaintance with him warranted, the fact that he had not died a natural death but had committed suicide seeming particularly to grieve her in a way I might have thought strange were not her own shadows by that time already beginning to gather.

Driving over the moors to the hospital that evening, I thought how precarious our previous well-being had been, how unwittingly blessed in our collective balance of mind, and how much I'd taken it for granted. I said so to Dad, who just stared out of the window saying nothing. Sanity and its vagaries were much discussed at this time, the fashionable theorists R. D. Laing and Thomas Szasz. Their ideas had never impinged on my father nor were they likely to; balance of mind was something you were entitled to take for

granted so far as he was concerned, 'Item no. 1 on the agenda, to get your Mam back to normal.'

Except affliction was normal too, and this one seemingly more common than I'd thought. Arriving at the lighted villa in its own little park, we found we were far from alone, the car park full, the nurse busy at Reception, and hanging about the entrance hall, as in all institutions (hospitals, law courts, passport offices), characters who joked with the staff, were clued up on the routine and, whether visitors or patients, seemed utterly at home. It was one of these knowing individuals, a young man familiar rather than affable, who took us along to what the nurse said was Mam's ward.

He flung open the door on Bedlam, a scene of unimagined wretchedness. What hit you first was the noise. The hospitals I had been in previously were calm and unhurried; voices were hushed; sickness, during visiting hours at least, went hand in hand with decorum. Not here. Crammed with wild and distracted women, lying or lurching about in all the wanton disarray of a Hogarth print, it was a place of terrible tumult. Some of the grey-gowned wild-eyed creatures were weeping, others shouting, while one demented wretch shrieked at short and regular intervals like some tropical

bird. Almost worse was a big dull-eyed woman who sat bolt upright on her bed, oblivious to the surrounding tumult, as silent and unmoving as a stone deity.

Obviously, I thought, we have strayed into the wrong ward, much as Elizabeth Taylor did in the film of *Suddenly Last Summer*. Mam was not ill like this. She had nothing to do with the distracted creature who sat by the nearest bed, her gown hitched high above her knees, banging her spoon on a tray. But as I turned to go I saw that Dad was walking on down the ward.

We had left Mam at the hospital that morning looking, even after weeks of illness, not much different from her usual self: weeping and distraught, it's true, but still plump and pretty, clutching her everlasting handbag and still somehow managing to face the world. As I followed my father down the ward I wondered why we were bothering: there was no such person here.

He stopped at the bed of a sad, shrunken woman with wild hair, who cringed back against the pillows.

'Here's your Mam,' he said.

And of course it was only that, by one of the casual cruelties that routine inflicts, she had on admission been

bathed, her hair washed and left uncombed and uncurled, so that now it stood out round her head in a mad halo, this straightaway drafting her into the ranks of the demented. Yet the change was so dramatic, the obliteration of her usual self so utter and complete, that to restore her even to an appearance of normality now seemed beyond hope. She was mad because she looked mad.

Dad sat down by the bed and took her hand.

'What have you done to me, Walt?' she said.

'Nay, Lil,' he said, and kissed her hand. 'Nay, love.'

And in the kissing and the naming my parents were revealed stripped of all defence. Because they seldom kissed, and though they were the tenderest and most self-sufficient couple, I had never seen my father do anything so intimate as to kiss my mother's hand and seldom since childhood heard them call each other by name. 'Mam' and 'Dad' was what my brother and I called them and what they called each other, their names kept for best. Or worst.

They had been Lil and Walt in their courting days, living on opposite sides of Tong Road in the twenties. Marriage and children had changed them to Mam and Dad, and it took a catastrophe for them to christen themselves again.

So when in 1946 he collapsed in the street and was taken to St James's with a perforated ulcer, Dad became Walt once more. And when Mam was crying with pain having had all her teeth out, she was not Mam but Lil. And to him she was Lil now.

There was only one chair by Mam's bed and no room for another; besides, Mam was crying, and Dad too, so I walked round the ward. Though many of the patients were unvisited, their disturbance and distress unalleviated by company, other beds hosted families as stunned and bewildered as we were. They sat huddled round a stricken mother, or a weeping daughter, careful to avoid the eye of other visitors and with none of the convivialities and camaraderie a usual hospital visit engenders.

Yet there were others who seemed entirely at ease in these surroundings, elderly sons of vacant mothers, jovial husbands of demented wives, and some whose faces were more coarse and void than those of whom they were visiting. They sat round the bed in bovine indifference, chatting across the demented creature in their midst, as if the lunacy of a loved one was no more than was to be expected.

It was from this time I conceived a dislike of Lancaster

I've never since lost. Having seen madness on that ward, I saw it echoed in face after face in the town. Though it's a pleasant enough place I find the people there less amiable and appealing than elsewhere in Lancashire, with the possible exception of Liverpool. There's an openness and generosity in Blackburn, Preston and Rochdale, maybe because these were virtues fostered in the mills; Lancaster, commercial, agricultural and (like Liverpool) once a port, seems sullen, tight-fisted and at night raw and violent.

Sometime in the course of this terrible hour a neat middle-aged woman stopped at the foot of Mam's bed.

'It's Mary, love. I'm off now. They've just rung me a taxi.' She turned to me. 'Could you just go and see if it's come?'

I went out into the entrance hall, cheered that one of these desperate women could, by a stay even in such unpromising surroundings, be recovered for normality and turned back into a sane and sensible creature. There must after all be hope. But if there was hope there was certainly no taxi, so I went back to the ward. Mary had by now passed on, making her farewells at another bed. I went over to tell her the taxi hadn't come only to find she was now telling her tale to an empty pillow.