# Hotel Tiberias

## A Tale of Two Grandfathers

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Published by Harper Perennial

Extract

Harper Perennial
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith
London W6 8JB

www.harperperennial.co.uk

This edition published by Harper Perennial 2005

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First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2004



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

ISBN-13 978-0-00-713021-4
ISBN-10 0-00-713021-X

Set in Bembo by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Maps by John Gilkes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

# PROLOGUE

I was sixteen when I found out. We were going on holiday to Scotland with another family. The car was already loaded at 6.30 a.m. with everything from frozen food to an inflatable dinghy. My mother, my brother and I were standing in the kitchen, ready to leave the moment my father said, let's go, so as not to start the twelve-hour drive on a bad note – we would have to keep our nerve for his overtaking manoeuvres on the A9. Mum said almost as an aside that we were not to be surprised if we heard the other paterfamilias refer to Grandpa as her step-father – why? – because he is. 'Grandpa adopted Lizzie and me when he married Granny. Our real father was her first husband, and he died when we were very small.' And then my father said, let's go.

My world did not fall apart. I did not feel betrayed or deceived because we had not been told sooner. I did not feel as though my own sense of identity had been weakened. As the August countryside passing by in car window-sized frames gave way to the purple hills of the Highlands, I wondered if my relationship with my grandfather would change now he was my step-grandfather. I saw no reason why it should. He was the only one I had ever known – I could not remember my father's father. We were the only grandchildren he had. Even though we were not related by blood he could never be anything other than our Grandpa. The real surprise was

that our mother was not entirely the person I thought she was. I had passed through that stage of early adolescence when you think your parents don't know anything about you, and I was beginning to realize how little I knew about them. Family gatherings thereafter became opportunities to observe the newly revealed relationships at work.

John Winthrop Hackett, my step-grandfather, was a great man. He was a career soldier who had reached the rank of major at the outbreak of the Second World War. He had what they call a 'good war' and was a brigadier by the end. He had shown great bravery, receiving wounds and decorations in equal measure. As a leader he had inspired enduring devotion in his subordinates, not least because of his maverick attitude towards his own superiors. He rose to the rank of full general and commanded the British Army of the Rhine during the deep mid-winter of the Cold War. He had been commander-in-chief of the British forces in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and still featured in those IRA assassination wish-lists that were discovered scribbled on Rizla papers and the backs of envelopes bearing the new decimal stamps. He was dubbed a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Bath. He had even been tipped for the top army job, but a frank letter to *The Times* on the ability of NATO to withstand a non-nuclear offensive, in which he asserted that Russian tanks would be in Paris in forty-eight hours, so infuriated his political masters that he was denied, it is said, this final promotion.

He was also a scholar. He had read Greats at New College, Oxford, having the precocity to complete that degree in two years and sit the finals for one in History the following summer. It was said that he did not know which to be, a soldier or a don, and that he became a soldier in a prolonged bout of donnish absent-mindedness. Even after becoming a soldier he gained a B. Litt. for his thesis on Saladin's campaign against

the Principality of Antioch in 1188. After he retired from the army he became Principal of King's College, London. It was his last public appointment. Granny and Grandpa lived in a narrow house on Campden Hill that had a security grille in front of the garden doors and a twisting wooden banister, perfect for sliding down, that I scratched from top to bottom with the buckle of my belt.

In 1975 Grandpa retired and he and Granny moved to a mill house in the Cotswolds that they had bought some years previously. It was an event that had an impact on my family too: we had to vacate the mill. We had lived there for five years, and it was the longest that we had stayed anywhere. My father was also a career soldier, a major at the time of his secondment to the Wessex Yeomanry in Cirencester, which was to be his last posting. I was six when we moved in. I had already had four different homes, three of which I could remember, army married quarters in Canada, Dorchester and Sevenoaks. While I remembered them all with affection, Coberley Mill was the best place a boy who loved woods and streams could possibly find himself. Leaving a house so old and so alive, the creaking boards below which water trickled through the old mill race, leaving the sylvan hollow in the Churn Valley was a wrench; moving into a house on the corner of a B road in the middle of a village near the M4, surrounded by flat land, was both a shock and a disappointment. Long stretches at boarding school augmented my alienation from our new 'home'.

Visiting Granny and Grandpa was also to revisit childhood memories. At first my brother and I would leave the lunch-table early and scramble onto the oak that had fallen across the stream where we used to have our tree house, or put on gumboots and rebuild a dam with nuggets of clay. Crayfish live in the banks, trout in the pools. Later on we would sit

with the adults listening to their serious talk upstairs in the drawing room, whose windows framed the big ash tree at the top of the cowslipped bank where the tyre-swing used to hang. The room itself had changed, the yarra boards covered with pale carpet, the windows double-glazed. The image of how it once had been faded quickly, but every now and again I would look out over the millpond and see myself on an oil-drum raft paddling upstream, a wartime mission deep in the jungles of Burma.

These birthdays and anniversaries, Boxing Days and Easters were always difficult occasions for my father. He may have married the general's daughter, but he was a different type of soldier. In 1944, at the age of seventeen, he had left school without sitting his Highers, grown a moustache, lied about his age and joined up. The war ended before he could be posted – 'the atom bomb saved my life,' he says – but his career did not lack active service: Palestine; Korea; Malaya. He met my mother during his regiment's tour of duty in West Germany. Five days after I was born in 1964 he left for fourteen months, fighting insurgents in the Radfan. He was a regimental soldier by nature and did not attend Staff College, partly because of his strong anti-intellectual bias. Grandpa, battlefield commander, sought out the weakest point and attacked. Any discussion on any topic between the two men invariably ended in Grandpa correcting my father's use of English, and my father taking umbrage. He would always lose more than the argument, his composure and his temper being frequent casualties of the engagement.

'Shan' Hackett was not an easy man with whom to have lunch. We never knew what his mood would be when we arrived. We never knew what part of his memoirs, his correspondence or his military punditry he would be rehearsing that day, or how he would try to suck us into the quicksand

of a discussion. Sometimes he would start right in with the barbs, like the time he asked my father, who had recently gone to work for an insurance company, 'How's trade?' as he walked through the door. Sometimes, when the approach work was slower, it was possible to avert the clash. It did no good to change the subject, as Shan needed no opening to bring up the topic again and reiterate his position, but one could harry at the margins and draw fire. We developed a variety of survival tactics. My grandmother and my brother would keep their heads below the parapet. My mother and my aunt Elizabeth sought distraction in the preparation and supply of food, although Lizzie was fond of joining the fray and could always retreat outside for a cigarette. She never married.

My strategy was to engage, but without the irritability that made my father vulnerable. I tried not to let his corrections and interruptions either anger or deflect me. I was not always successful; one discussion we had when I was nineteen, a particularly weighty debate that centred on dukes in bathing suits, ended when I called him a mental masturbator. 'Dear boy,' he said, 'I do so enjoy our talks. They remind me of my time at university.' I too had come to enjoy our rigorous exchanges.

The only person who did not have a strategy was Susan, the only child Margaret and Shan had together, primarily because she did not seem to need one. She was Daddy's Little Girl, as the youngest daughter often is, though there was never any suggestion that this favouritism stemmed from her being his only natural child. She had her own name for him, 'Fred', and as a Christmas present from her an ordinary-looking tie with the letter 'F' repeated in a mock heraldic design was a comedic *tour de force*. Susan's husband, Andrew Taylor, a lean, urbane man, had been an officer in the Gurkhas. His career

thereafter took them to Australia and Hong Kong. They separated and divorced in the 1980s, Susan moving back to London. She died of pneumonia on Christmas Day 1992.

Though married to his favourite – or maybe because of that – Andrew was no more exempt from the general's displeasure than was my father. Matters came to a head one Guy Fawkes Night, my grandfather's birthday, when the two sons-in-law felt so insulted that they made a pact never to come to one of these 'parties' again. When the next occasion swung round my father declined the invitation, telling the general they would both have a more enjoyable day if he did not attend, and I was thrust into the front line.

It goes without saying, or rather it does all too frequently in English families, that I loved, love all these people. I was also immensely proud of Grandpa. I found exciting his talk of letters to *The Times*, of correspondence with eminent people and comrades in arms, of speaking engagements and radio interviews and the writing of forewords – I relished these dispatches from a life of the mind and of letters that was absent in my own home. He published a war memoir in 1977 called *I Was a Stranger* and though I was too young to appreciate the quality of the writing, the story it told was straight out of the war comics that passed around my school. Five years later he published a bestseller, a future-history entitled *Third World War*. It was translated into many languages, but its crowning achievement was to have been clearly visible on Ronald Reagan's desk in a *Time* picture of the Oval Office.

*I Was a Stranger* told the story of Brigadier Shan Hackett's experience of the Battle of Arnhem, the airborne attempt to capture bridges across the Rhine in September 1944. He was in command of the 4th Para Brigade, a force he had raised eighteen months previously. The brigade had participated in the invasions of Sicily and the Italian mainland. It made a vital

contribution to the success of the Taranto landing, taking the harbour and establishing a beach-head, but Operation Market Garden, as the plan for capturing the Rhine crossings was codenamed, was far more ambitious. It failed. The 4th Para showed great bravery and sustained heavy losses before they surrendered. Hackett had been wounded twice. The bullet in the thigh seemed the more serious, but when he reached the military hospital in Arnhem it was discovered that a piece of shrapnel had entered his abdomen and shredded his large intestine – 'two sections and twelve perforations, you know'. Grandpa still had the vest he was wearing at the time. The German doctors gave up on him, but a South African surgeon called Lipmann Kessel, who had also been captured, operated and stitched the serviceable pieces of his gut together with such skill that his life was saved.

Hackett was the most senior officer to have been captured, but as the allied forces had parachuted in without badges of rank and regiment, the Germans did not realize they had a brigadier in their custody. On the third day after his operation two Dutch resistance workers walked into the hospital disguised as orderlies, dressed the brigadier as one, and walked him out past the guards. He was taken to the house of a Dutch family where he was hidden for nearly five months while he recuperated. His strength regained, he set out for the Allied lines with another Dutch resistance worker. They crossed Holland by bicycle to rendezvous with Canadian commandos on the banks of the Meuse.

The title of the book shows what was most important to Hackett: the courage and self-sacrifice of the de Nooij family. One of the few books he had to read during his convalescence was a copy of the New Testament in the Greek of its earliest editions. The title is a quotation from Matthew, chapter 25, verses 35–6: 'I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was

thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:/ Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick and ye visited me: I was in prison and ye came unto me.'

It was not long after the memoir was published that the film *A Bridge Too Far* was released. Grandpa escaped portrayal, and for him it was the one good thing about the film. For me, it reinforced my perception of the Second World War, that the Allies were right, but that the Germans had the best kit.

One does not have to come from an army family to be aware of weapons and war from the age of about three. Boys everywhere play with guns, have toy soldiers, fight imaginary battles. When we lived in Dorchester, our war games took place in a copse behind the house and were given an added reality by the fact it had once been the site of an army post. The barbed wire still stood in places and the ground bore signs of trenches. You could easily find shell cases in the undergrowth and I once came upon some live rounds, but the best thing I found was a helmet, a proper Tommy steel helmet half covered by dead leaves. It was added to the army paraphernalia around the house, from caps and clothes in the dressing-up box, to things stored in ammo boxes in the garage and ashtrays made from the base of a tank round.

I graduated from Dinky toys to making plastic models of war planes and gunboats, though as my father had served in armoured cars and tanks these were my favourite kits. A Japanese firm, Tamiya, made the best models and their range had a preponderance of German hardware. I do not know exactly how it came about, but I became almost obsessive about the German Panzer Mark IV tank. It is a particularly male condition, the urge to collect and complete series of things, to bring order to the world. It is a compulsion, and I had fixed on the Panzer Mark IV in my quest for perfection. Apart from

the standard turreted configuration, with either short or long barrel, the tank's elegant chassis provided a most versatile armoured platform on which to mount other types of artillery – vast mortars, anti-aircraft guns, field pieces. In all there were fifteen variations on the Panzer Mark IV theme. I rattled through the ones covered in the Tamiya range, and then began to hybridize the kits. It was a phase that passed on encountering puberty and punk rock.

I never played with the models – I might have broken them. I never imagined them rolling in regiments across Northern Europe killing people. Somehow it escaped me that Grandpa had actually faced German tanks in battle. My only experience of real tanks placed them as things to be clambered over at the Bovington Tank Museum. My pleasure was in the assembly of the models, an incremental achievement of painting and gluing that brought the set closer to completion. Curiously, for a music genre that advocated anarchy in the UK, punk records also provided a collecting opportunity in the form of limited edition sleeves and vinyl colours. Grandpa's comment on punk, that it was 'repetitive thump and whine', led both to my assertion that all music was by its very nature repetitive and to a tedious, though unharassed, luncheon for everyone else.

Our perennial discussion though centred on language. As a student of literature and modern languages I shared his keen interest in its use, and having studied both Latin and Greek I could appreciate some of his bugbears – 'logo' and 'nomad' should be pronounced with a short first vowel to accord with their Greek derivation, the 'e' of 'economy' should always be long by the same token, and 'the *hoi polloi*' was a tautology that betrayed both pretension and ignorance. He was a hard master, but he led by example. He continued to read works in both Latin and Greek throughout his life. When my Greek

'O' level came close he tutored me in one of the set texts, Book VI of the *Odyssey* which opens with the hero and his hyacinthine locks being washed ashore on Nausicaa's island. As well as speaking French, German and Italian, Grandpa had learned Arabic as a young man, and continued to receive instruction in its weak verbs into his seventies.

By the time the exam results came, I knew he was not my blood relative and I wondered if, in retrospect, there had been any clues to that fact. The only ones I could pinpoint were in talk of his own family. He was extremely proud of his Norman-Irish ancestry, of the thirteenth-century church in Tipperary where his family coat of arms was escutcheoned on the wall. His father had emigrated to Western Australia and had left it late in life to have children; the fourth of five, his only son, being born in 1910 when he was sixty-seven. Sir John Winthrop Hackett senior died when Shan was six. He had amassed a sizeable fortune through his mineral holdings and ownership of the *West Australian* newspaper, a fortune his will stipulated would go to the University of Western Australia should his young widow remarry. She did; money thereafter was in shorter supply. Nonetheless, Shan was due to take up a place at Winchester College in England at the age of thirteen, but a severe case of glandular fever caused him to miss the intake. Instead he went to the Geelong Grammar School, near Melbourne. Maybe it was his father dying when he was still so young, or maybe it was as a result of his frequent visits to Ireland while he was at Oxford, but reconnecting with his family's history seemed to be his chief motivation for joining the army. In fact he often denied that he had ever joined the army. What he had done was quite different; he had joined his great-grandfather's regiment. And there it was, always 'my great-grandfather', never 'your great-great-great-grandfather', never 'our family coat of arms'. Appropriately, when asked

to suggest supporters for his banner in the Bath Chapel at Westminster Abbey, it was Susan's deflating wit that supplied the owl and the pussycat.

I knew all this about Grandpa, and more, but I knew next to nothing about my real grandfather and my mother had not offered much detail when she introduced me to him. The time came to ask. One of the reasons her real father was not spoken about, she said, was because he had committed suicide, and she had not been told of it until the eve of her wedding in 1961. At that point I had no conception of the matrix of guilt and blame and shame that holds the survivors. My view of the act was still formed by the notions of Romantic literature and rock and roll.

He was a German called Fritz. Fritz Grossmann, or rather Großmann. He was a hotelier in Palestine, co-owner and manager of the Hotel Tiberias in the town of the same name. My mother was three when he died and she could remember very little about him. She remembered how he shuffled his feet in the slippers he wore around the house, him going to sleep in the afternoons with a newspaper over his face. She remembered one time standing in the enclosed circular bed at the foot of a fruit tree, crying because there were ants crawling over her bare feet, and her father saying, 'Well, just come out of there then.' As for the reasons for his suicide, it was said he had a depressive nature. His debts were also mentioned, but no one really knew why he did it. He had borrowed heavily to build a Lido at the hotel's private beach on the Sea of Galilee, but the unsettled situation in Palestine and the events in Europe that led to war caused the tourist trade to fall away. When war came, his Austrian-born widow Margaret, her two daughters, her sister and her mother-in-law were interned by the British authorities together with all 'enemy aliens' in Palestine. Shan Hackett had already been

courting her for some time, and continued to call on her in the internment camp. They were married in Jerusalem in 1942. Margaret followed Shan to Egypt, while the two girls stayed with their grandmother – Granny G – and went to school in Jerusalem. In 1944 they all left for England, but Granny G stayed behind in the land of her birth.

The hotel had been administered by the Custodian for Enemy Property for the duration of the war, and an Arab manager installed. I believe Granny G intended to return to her home and business when it was over, but the hotel was eventually confiscated by the new Israeli government. She lost everything. The compensation, which did not arrive until the 1960s, was of a token nature. She lived in Beirut for a number of years before moving to Germany where she died.

Most of us have grown up hearing anecdotes not just about ourselves, but also about our parents and grandparents, stories that build into a received family history, forming our sense of where we come from and who we are. Happy or sad, they make up an oral tradition to which the family continuously adds. While the telling of my family narrative was still turning up new digressions and sub-plots, the salient points I thought of as settled. It was astonishing to discover a whole section of the main story line, and such a dramatic one, had remained untold for so long, astonishing to realize I had German relatives of whom I had never even heard. My sense of self may not have been weakened, but it had certainly been broadened.

Army children often have a problem answering the question, 'Where do you come from?' It can even affect one's national status; my brother has a Canadian passport. I had never thought of myself as anything other than English, even though I knew my grandmother was Austrian, and despite having visited our relatives in Graz I did not think of my mother as anything other than English either. It seemed absurd

that her application for a driver's licence in the mid-1970s should be questioned because she had been born in Haifa.

There was all the difference in the world between being quarter Austrian and being half German. The former I regarded as a recessive element in my make-up, diluted by a generation and distant enough to be left out of account; the latter could not be so easily ignored. When I opted to study German as an 'A' level it was because I got on with its grammatical certainties. Now I knew my mother had been a little German girl called Brigitte Grossmann once upon a time, I wondered (for as long as it took to dismiss the idea) if I might have inherited an aptitude. Did she still, if ever, think of herself as German? We never spoke the language together, although she had taught me to count to ten in German when I was four years old, a time when I still spoke English with a Canadian accent. I had lost the accent quickly on returning to England, just as she seemed to have lost the command of her first language.

As I could not ignore the fact that I was half German, I had to consider whether it ought to make a difference to my behaviour. I was not about to start cheering for Germany in a World Cup qualifier, but shouldn't I stop the name-calling 1918, 1945, 1966 John Bull jingoism? After all, wasn't it possible that members of my own family had played for the opposition in all three contests? Unlikely in 1966, but still possible in theory. Shouldn't I own up to the Germanic part of my ancestry, take on the responsibilities of being German, the guilt? The people I told seemed to assume I would, and would break the flow of a tirade against, say, what Germans do with their beach towels in Mallorca to make placatory reference to my ancestry – 'no offence', assuming their remarks could offend. I did not know enough about my newly revealed family to feel that bothered.

The subject of Fritz Grossmann came up only twice more in the next thirteen years. Occasionally a story was told about the girls' childhood in Palestine, usually as a digression from some other topic – a news item about rabies inoculation reminds my mother of the time she was bitten by a dog in Tiberias and of the long needle required to pierce the solar plexus; a picture of flat bread being fished out of a *tandoor* in Peshawar transports Lizzie to the Old City of Jerusalem. Although younger, Liz seemed to feel much more of a connection with the German side of the family than my mother did as a result of her closeness to Granny G. At one time she had been a regular visitor to our relatives there. It was after one of her visits that a folder of photocopied documents and pictures appeared in our kitchen. Among them was the first photograph I had seen of my real grandfather.

It showed a man of medium build smartly dressed in a light summer suit and wire-rimmed glasses. The jacket is buttoned over a striped tie. The trousers have turn-ups. He has dark wavy hair and a sun-tanned face which is inclined down and slightly away from the camera so it cannot be clearly seen. In each brown hand he holds that of a small girl in a short cotton dress, white socks and sandals. Nearest the camera stands my mother, wearing the serious expression of an eldest child reminiscent of my own at the same age. Furthest away is Lizzie, peering round her father's legs at the lens. She is almost two and looks to have the potential for mischief. They stand on a gravel path edged with black and white stones. There is a bit of a lawn and a flowerbed; a rose climbs up the wall of a white-washed brick building in the background. A palm frond intrudes from the left. The picture was taken at the Lido on the Sea of Galilee, my mother said.

The only other time my real grandfather was mentioned, and then not even by name, was at a dinner in a restaurant

in London. It was winter, almost a year after Susan's death, and I had been flat-sitting her apartment while it was on the market. Granny and Grandpa and Lizzie had come up for the night, something to do with the Order of the Bath as I recall, and certainly the conversation came round to one of Grandpa's favourite subjects – his ancestry and coat of arms. I do not remember exactly how it came up, or who suggested I take a more active interest in compiling the Hackett history. It was an idea that had to be nipped in the bud and, reckoning they knew that I knew already, rather than offend with a direct refusal I said I would be more interested to find out about my real grandfather. Lizzie let out an exclamation of horror. I may have been breaking a family taboo, but it was too late to take back the words, and what with the wine and the wide open opportunity, I wanted to say more. I said that Grandpa was the only grandfather I had known and that I loved him as much as a grandson could, but the fact remained he was not my blood relation. As a consequence there was 25 per cent of my genetic inheritance about which I knew nothing and was curious, and which I could no longer deny. My interest was noted and it was said that we would talk about the matter at a more appropriate time.

The time more appropriate never did come. Grandpa's reminiscences began to stretch further back, leaving behind the smouldering issues of the Cold War and Northern Ireland and revisiting his years in the Eastern Mediterranean. One day he would be reiterating the argument he had advanced at the time, that Rhodes rather than Sicily should have been the site of the Allied counterattack in 1943; on another he would be reliving a cavalry charge against Arab irregulars, sabres drawn, while serving with the Trans-Jordan Frontier Force, and as an aside, 'that was when I first met your grandmother'. Frequently he told stories that we had heard before, often using the exact

same form of words as he had on the previous telling. He was rehearsing his memoirs. He was given a dictaphone one birthday, but he did not start to use it until shortly, too shortly, before his death.

Coberley Mill began to show signs of it's aging occupants. Tubular handles in a hospital-white plasticized finish appeared in doorways and bathrooms. A stair-lift was installed. The rituals of gathering remained broadly the same, although the bottle of champagne before lunch became New Zealand sparkling. Nonetheless, Grandpa would still produce his silver swizzle stick and defizz it somewhat. The trout in the pool below the millpond sluice grew fatter on the bread we threw them. Ducklings disappeared one by one. Dippers flitted past the drawing-room window. If Grandpa was now less inclined to argue, he was more prone to insult, and Lizzie bore the brunt of this.

The isolation that made up so much of the charm of the house came to be a liability for eighty-year-olds. The narrow lane leading down the hill from the main road arrived steeply at a bridge over a stream; snow made it impassable. If that were to coincide with a power-cut or a problem with the boiler or a burst pipe . . . The loneliness of the spot must have made it seem vulnerable to burglary. One day, when my grandparents were away, a gang of thieves reversed a pick-up through the heavy oak front door. To silence the burglar alarm they tore the bell off the wall and threw it into the millpond. What they could not have realized was that, ever since the IRA threats against Grandpa's life, the alarm had been hard-wired to Special Branch in Cheltenham. A rapid reaction unit had the place surrounded in thirty minutes.

In the new year of 1997 Grandpa went for a walk up the lane and was discovered sometime later lying on the verge. His balance had not been good for a number of years, but it

was not clear whether he had fallen and then suffered a stroke or the other way round. He was admitted to hospital, and then to a rehabilitation centre where his recovery progressed to the point where he was able to go home. Soon after, though, he developed jaundice and returned to hospital for more tests. These revealed he had cancer of the liver.

The old soldier faded away over that spring and summer, as the Halle-Bopp comet waned. The warrior became meek, and I would push him in his wheelchair to feed the fish, or to inspect the lambs in the meadow where I had played kiss-chase as a boy with the girls from the farm in the village. He stayed at home until the end. The final phase of his illness came at the beginning of September. The last time I saw him he was yellow and swollen. His hands were puffed up and dimpled at the knuckles. His eyes were closed. His carer had said that he might be able to hear so I should talk to him, but I could not find anything to say. I sat watching his chest rise and fall as he took gulping dry breaths, between which there were interminable intervals, so long I had to wonder if he would ever breathe in again. I bent over him to tell him I loved him, to kiss him goodbye. His moustache tickled my cheek.

Grandpa often said he could start the day only if when he turned to *The Times* obituary page his was not there. What the comment said about him depended on which camp you were in, those who thought him an egotistical martinet, and those who found in his amused take on public life irreverence and self-deprecation. The former resented being told that 'egotistical' should be pronounced with a short 'e'; for them his querulousness was merely a way of showing off that he was cleverer than you. The latter were inclined to see a certain intellectual mischievousness in his pedantry. Besides being the subject of jest, the ritual of turning to the obituary page first

was for him a *memento mori*, an acknowledgement that the day would arrive when his own appeared there.

When it came, the obituaries were indeed encomious. Condensed into fifteen hundred words his public career glittered with decorations and honours. His qualities as a scholar, soldier and leader were dwelt upon. His sense of humour and approachability were mentioned in the same breath as his pedantry, or rather, to quote his entry in *Who's Who*, an interest in 'the pursuit of exactitude, called by some pedantry'. It was a fitting send-off for one of the breed obituarists know collectively as 'the Moustaches', the heroes of the Second World War. At his memorial service in St Martin-in-the-Fields Church there were five field marshals, three air marshals, and thirty-six assorted generals among the eight hundred people who attended.

Shan and Margaret were married for fifty-five years. She was his *Schatz*, his treasure. The pain she suffered during his last illness was terrible to behold; her sadness after his death was deep indeed, and into it intruded the sublunary necessity of ordering his affairs. Before his death King's College, London, had been offered and accepted the gift of his papers. He had left an ample record of himself which was still being archived four years later, and as the papers were sorted through and boxed up, occasionally a gem would emerge. One item that caught my eye was a large Manila envelope containing the photographs and negatives he had taken while touring the Crusader Castles of Northern Syria for his thesis on Saladin. As I had an enlarger at home I offered to print them for Granny.

My father had taught me to print black and white photographs using pictures he had taken during the Korean War – helicopters and tanks in the snow, cherry-blossom time in Japan. His father, a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society,

had taught him. I had become interested in old printing processes – carbon and cyanotype and gum bichromate – and in the world such old photographs portrayed, so to come across a hoard of negatives from the 1930s was exciting. That they showed an obscure corner of the world made these even more intriguing. Grandpa had occasionally spoken about this journey down the Orontes Valley on a mule, and having had similar experiences in Asia I was eager to work on the pictures.

They are not good photographs. Though Grandpa listed painting among his hobbies, had even attended art school, he did not have an eye for taking pictures and he was further disadvantaged by the camera he was using, 'a poor camera, borrowed from a brother officer' whose bellows leaked light. The flat noonday sun deprives the scrubby hills and tumbled masonry of all contrast and bleaches the sky to a dull white. Where the ruins are substantial and well preserved, the photographs fail to capture the spirit of the place. Admittedly they were not taken for a wholly pictorial purpose, but even as illustrations they are disappointing.

Nevertheless, however good or bad they are, these were 1/60th of a second slices of May 1935 in Northern Syria. They were part of the source material for a story that had become a family legend, proof that it really had happened. I wondered what else had survived from that time, and what I could find out about my real grandfather. If such discoveries could be made about a family legend, why not a family mystery? The telling and re-telling of the events recorded in a family's oral history seldom follow the same path twice. The self-contained episodes are re-combined according to theme. Their chronology becomes obscured and the larger story fragmented. Yet I felt certain that if I could track down more concrete evidence to which to anchor the anecdotes, I would be able to reassemble these pieces into a narrative that would

not only tell what had happened sixty years previously in Palestine, but also how the protagonists came to be there in the first place. Maybe I would even find out why my real grandfather had committed suicide. At the least I might find his grave.