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‘Deeply satisfying . . . Frayn
has written nothing better.’

Independent

Spies

Winner of the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award

MICHAEL FRAYN

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Spies

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The third week of June, and there it is again: the same almost embarrassingly familiar breath of sweetness that comes every year about this time. I catch it on the warm evening air as I walk past the well-ordered gardens in my quiet street, and for a moment I'm a child again and everything's before me – all the frightening, half-understood promise of life.

It must come from one of the gardens. Which one? I can never trace it. And what is it? It's not like the heartbreaking, tender sweetness of the lime blossom, for which this city's known, or the serene summer happiness of the honeysuckle. It's something quite harsh and coarse. It reeks. It has a kind of sexual urgency to it. And it unsettles me, as it always does. I feel ... what? A restlessness. A longing to be over the woods at the end of the street and away, away. And yet at the same time I have a kind of homesickness for where I am. Is that possible? I have a feeling that something, somewhere, has been left unresolved, that some secret thing in the air around me is still waiting to be discovered.

Another hint of it as the summer breeze stirs, and I know that the place I should like to be off to is my childhood. Perhaps the home I'm homesick for is still there, after all. I can't help noticing, as I do every summer in late June, when that sweet reek comes, that there are cheap flights to that far-off nearby land. Twice I pick up the phone to book; twice I put it down again. You can't go back, everyone knows that ... So I'm never going, then? Is that what I'm deciding? I'm getting old. Who knows, this year may be the last chance I'll get ...

But what *is* it, that terrible, disturbing presence in the summer air? If only I knew what the magic blossom was called, if only I could see it, perhaps I'd be able to identify the source of its power. I suddenly catch it while I'm walking my daughter and her two small children back to their car after their weekly visit. I put a hand on her arm. She knows about plants and gardening. 'Can you smell it? There ... now ... What is it?'

She sniffs. 'Just the pines,' she says. There are tall pines growing in all the sandy gardens, sheltering the modest houses from the summer sun and making our famously good air fresh and exhilarating. There's nothing clean or resinous, though, about the reek I can detect insinuating itself so slyly. My daughter wrinkles her nose. 'Or do you mean that rather ... vulgar smell?' she says.

I laugh. She's right. It is a rather vulgar smell.

'Liguster,' she says.

Liguster ... I'm no wiser. I've heard the word, certainly, but no picture comes to mind, and no explanation of the power it has over me. 'It's a shrub,' says my daughter. 'Quite common. You must have seen it in parks. Very dull looking. It always makes me think of depressing Sunday afternoons in the rain.' Liguster ... No. And yet, as another wave of that shameless summons drifts over us, everything inside me stirs and shifts.

Liguster ... And yet it's whispering to me of some thing secret, of some dark and unsettling thing at the back of my mind, of something I don't quite like to think about ... I wake up in the night with the word nagging at me. Liguster ...

Hold on, though. Was my daughter speaking English when she told me that? I get down the dictionary ... No – she wasn't. And as soon as I see what it is in English I can't help laughing again. Of course! How obvious! I'm laughing this time partly out of embarrassment, because a professional translator shouldn't be caught out by such a simple word – and also because, now I know what it is, it seems such a ridiculously banal and inappropriate cue for such powerful feelings.

Now all kinds of things come back to me. Laughter, for a start. On a summer's day nearly sixty years ago. I've never thought about it before, but now there she is again, my friend Keith's mother, in the long-lost green summer shade, her brown eyes sparkling, laughing at something Keith has written. I see why, of course, now that I know what it was, scenting the air all around us.

Then the laughter's gone. She's sitting in the dust in front of me, weeping, and I don't know what to do or what to say. All around us once again, seeping unnoticed into the deepest recesses of my memory, to stay with me for the rest of my life, is that sweet and luring reek.

Keith's mother. She must be in her nineties now. Or dead. How many of the others are still alive? How many of them remember?

What about Keith himself? Does he ever think about the things that happened that summer? I suppose he may be dead, too.

Perhaps I'm the only one who still remembers. Or half-remembers. Glimpses of different things flash into my mind, in random sequence, and are gone. A shower of sparks ... A feeling of shame ... Someone unseen coughing, trying not to be heard ... A jug covered by a lace weighted with four blue beads ...

And, yes – those words spoken by my friend Keith that set everything off in the first place. It's often hard to remember the exact words that someone uttered half a century ago, but these are easy, because there were so few of them. Six, to be precise. Spoken quite casually, like the most passing of remarks, as light and insubstantial as soap bubbles. And yet they changed everything.

As words do.

I suddenly have the feeling that I should like to think about all this at some length, now I've started, and to establish some order in it all, some sense of the connections. There were things that no one ever explained. Things that no one even said. There were secrets. I should like to bring them out into the daylight at last. And I sense the presence still, even now that I've located the source of my unrest, of something at the back of it all that remains unresolved.

I tell my children I'm going to London for a few days.

'Do we have a contact for you there?' asks my well-organised daughter-in-law.

'Memory Lane, perhaps,' suggests my son drily. We are evidently all speaking English together. He can sense my restlessness.

'Exactly,' I reply. 'The last house before you go round the bend and it turns into Amnesia Avenue.'

I don't tell them that I'm following the track of a shrub that flowers for a few weeks each summer, and destroys my peace.

I certainly don't tell them the name of the shrub. I scarcely like to name it to myself. It's too ridiculous.

2

Everything is as it was, I discover when I reach my destination, and everything has changed.

Nearly half a century has passed since I last stepped out of a train at this little wooden station, but my feet carry me with a kind of effortless, dreamlike inevitability down the sloping station approach to the quietly busy mid-afternoon main road, left towards the muddled little parade of shops, and left again by the letter box into the long, straight, familiar avenue. The main road's full of fussy new traffic arrangements, the shops have impersonal new commercial names and frontages, and the stringy prunus saplings I remember along the verges of the avenue are now wise and dignified trees. But when I turn the corner once again, off the avenue into the Close ...

There it is, as it always was. The same old quiet, sweet, dull ordinariness.

I stand on the corner, looking at it, listening to it, breathing it in, not sure whether I'm moved to be here again after all this time, or whether I'm quite indifferent.

I walk slowly up to the little turning circle at the end. The same fourteen houses sit calmly complacent in the warm, dull summer afternoon, exactly as they always did. I walk slowly back to the corner again. It's all still here, exactly as it always was. I don't know why I should find this so surprising. I wasn't expecting anything different. And yet, after fifty years ...

As the first shock of familiarity subsides, though, I begin to see that everything's not really as it was at all. It's changed completely. The houses have become tidy and tedious, their disparate architectural styles somehow homogenised by new porches and lamps and add-on timbering. I remember each of them as being a world unto itself, as different from all the others as the people who occupied them. Each of them, behind its screen of roses or honeysuckle, of limes or buddleia, was a mystery. Now almost all that luxuriant growth has vanished, and been replaced by hard standing and cars. More cars queue silently along the kerb. The fourteen separate kingdoms have coalesced into a kind of landscaped municipal car park. The mysteries have all been solved. There's a polite, international scent of fast-growing evergreens in the air. But of that wild, indecent smell that lured me here – even on this late June day not a trace remains.

I look up at the sky, the one feature of every landscape and townscape that endures from generation to generation and century to century. Even the sky has changed. Once the war was written across it in a tangled scribble of heroic vapour trails. There were the upraised fingers of the searchlights at night, and the immense coloured palaces of falling flares. Now even the sky has become mild and bland.

I hesitate on the corner again. I'm beginning to feel rather foolish. Have I come all this way just to walk up the road and back, and smell the cypress hedges? I can't think what else to do, though, or what else to feel. I've come to the end of my plans.

And then I become aware of the atmosphere changing around me, as if the past were somehow rematerialising out of the air itself.

It takes me a moment to locate the cause. It's a sound – the sound of an unseen train, muffled and distant at first, then bursting into the clear as it emerges from the cutting through the high ground behind the houses at the top of the Close, just like the train I arrived on twenty minutes earlier. It passes invisibly along the open embankment behind the houses on the left-hand side of the street, then crosses the hollowness of a bridge and slows towards the station beyond.

As this familiar sequence of sounds unrolls, the whole appearance of the Close shifts in front of my eyes. The house on the left-hand corner here, the one I'm standing outside, becomes the Sheldons, the house on the opposite corner the Hardiments. I begin to hear other sounds. The endless clacking of Mr Sheldon's shears unseen behind the high beech hedge, now vanished. The endless scales played by the Hardiments' pale children from gloomy rooms behind the screen of neatly pleached limes (still there). I know, if I turn my head, I shall see further along the street the Geest twins playing some complex skipping game together, their identical pigtails identically bouncing ... and in the Averys' drive an oily confusion of Charlie and Dave and the constituents of a dismantled three-wheeler ...

But of course what I'm looking at now is No. 2, next to the Hardiments. Even this appears curiously like all the other houses now, in spite of the fact that it's attached to No. 3 – the only semi-detached pair in the Close. It seems to have acquired a name: Wentworth. It was just a number when I lived in it, and scarcely even a number, since the plate on the gatepost had been creosoted over. There's still something faintly embarrassing about it, though, in spite of its grand new name, and its fresh white render, and the iron control exercised over its front garden by paving stones and impersonal-looking ground cover. Beneath the clean smoothness of the render I can almost see the old cracked and water-marked grey. Through the heavy flags sprout the ghosts of the promiscuous muddle of unidentified shrubs that my father never tended, and the little patch of bald lawn. Our house was made even more shameful by the partner it's yoked to, which was in an even worse state than ours because the Pinchers' garden was a dump for abandoned furniture warped by the rain, and offcuts of lumber and metal that Mr Pincher had stolen from work. Or so everyone in the street believed. Perhaps it was just because of the name, it occurs to me now. In any case the Pinchers were the undesirable elements in the Close – even less desirable than we were, and the terrible connectedness of our houses brought us down with them.

This is what I see as I look at it now. But is that the way that he sees it at his age? I mean the awkward boy who lives in that unkempt house between the Hardiments and the Pinchers – Stephen Wheatley, the one with the stick-out ears and the too-short grey flannel school shirt hanging out of the too-long grey flannel school shorts. I watch him emerge from the warped front door, still cramming food into his mouth from tea. Everything about him is in various shades of grey – even the elastic belt, striped like the hatband of an old-fashioned boater, and fastened with a metal snake curled into the shape of an S. The stripes on the belt are in two shades of grey, because he's entirely monochrome, and he's monochrome because this is how I recognise him now, from the old black-and-white snaps I have at home, that my grandchildren laugh at in disbelief when I tell them it's me. I share their incredulity. I shouldn't have the slightest idea what Stephen Wheatley looks like if it weren't for the snaps, or ever guess that he and I were related if it weren't for the name written on the back.

In the tips of my fingers, though, even now, I can feel the delicious serrated texture of the snake's scaliness.

Stephen Wheatley ... Or just plain Stephen ... On his school reports S. J. Wheatley, in the classroom or the playground just plain Wheatley. Strange names. None of them seems quite to fit him as I watch him now. He turns back, before he slams the front door, and shouts some inadequate insult with his mouth full in response to yet another supercilious jibe from his insufferable elder brother. One of his grubby tennis shoes is undone and one of his long grey socks has slipped down his leg into a thick concertina; I can feel in my fingertips, as clearly as the scaliness of the snake, the hopeless bagginess of the failed garter beneath the turned-down top.

Does he know, even at that age, what his standing is in the street? He knows precisely, even if he doesn't know that he knows it. In the very marrow of his bones he understands that there's something not quite right about him and his family, something that doesn't quite fit with the pigtailed Geest girls and the oil-stained Avery boys, and never will.

He doesn't need to open the front gate because it's open already, rotted drunkenly away from the top hinge. I know where he's going. Not across the road to see Norman Stott, who might be all right if it weren't for his little brother Eddie; there's something wrong with Eddie – he keeps hanging around, drooling and grinning and trying to touch you. Not to the Averys or the Geests. Certainly not to see Barbara Berrill, who's as sly and treacherous as most girls are, and who seems even more dislikeable now that his brother Geoff has taken to greasing his hair and hanging around in the twilight smoking cigarettes with her elder sister Deirdre. The Berrill girls' father is away in the army, and everyone says they're running wild.

Stephen's already crossing over the road, as I knew he would, too preoccupied even to turn his head to look for traffic – but then of course in the middle of the war there's no traffic to look for, apart from the occasional bicycle and the slow-plodding horses that draw the floats of the milkman and baker. He's walking slowly, his mouth slightly open, lost in some kind of vague daydream. What do I feel about him as I watch him now? Mostly, I think, an itch to take him by the shoulders and shake him, and tell him to wake up and stop being so ... so *unsatisfactory*. I'm not the first person, I recall, to have this itch.

I follow him past Trewinnick, the mysterious house where the blackout curtains are always drawn, with a garden decaying behind a cold northern forest of dark firs. Trewinnick isn't shameful, though, like our house and the Pinchers'; its gloomy introversion has a sinister allure. No one knows the name of the people who live here, or even how many of them there are. Their faces are swarthy, their clothes are black. They come and go in the hours of darkness, and keep the blackout drawn in the light.

It's the house next door that he's on his way to. No. 9. Chollerton. The Haywards. He opens the white wicket gate on its well-oiled hinges and closes it carefully behind him. He walks up the neat red brick path that curves through the rose beds, and lifts the wrought iron knocker on the heavy oak front door. Two respectful thumps, not too loud, dampened by the solidity of the oak.

I wait outside the gate and discreetly inspect the house. It's changed less than most of the others. The mellow red brick is still well pointed, the woodwork of the window frames and gables and garage doors as flawlessly white as when Mr Hayward used to

paint them himself, in white overalls as clean as the paintwork, whistling, whistling, from morning to night. The red brick path still curves through the rose beds, and the edges of the beds are as geometrically sharp as they used to be. The front door's still unpainted oak, and still pierced by a little diamond-shaped window of spun glass. The name discreetly announced by the weathered copper plate beside the door is still Chollerton. Here at any rate the past has been preserved, in all its perfection.

Stephen waits at the front door. Now, too late, he becomes aware of his appearance. He pulls up the sagging sock, and bends down to tie the untied tennis shoe. But already the door's opening a foot or two, and a boy of Stephen's age stands framed in the darkness of the house beyond. He, too, is wearing a grey flannel shirt and grey flannel shorts. His shirt, though, is not too short, his shorts are not too long. His grey socks are neatly pulled up to half an inch below his knees, and his brown leather sandals are neatly buckled.

He turns his head away. I know what he's doing. He's listening to his mother ask who it is at the door. He's telling her it's Stephen. She's telling him either to ask him in or else to go out and play, but not to hang around on the doorstep, half in and half out.

Keith opens the door completely. Stephen hurriedly scuffs his feet over the metal bars of the shoe scraper, then again over the doormat inside, and the sock with the failed garter slips back down. The door closes behind him.

This is where the story began. At the Haywards. On the day when Keith, my best friend, first pronounced those six simple words that turned our world inside out.

I wonder what it's like inside that front door now. The first thing you saw then, even as the door swung open, was a polished oak hall stand, with clothes brushes, shoe horns and button hooks hanging from it, and a rack for sticks and umbrellas. Then, as you went inside, dark oak panelling, with two matching watercolours of the Trossachs by Alfred Hollings RA, and two china plates covered with blue pagodas and little blue rice-hatted figures crossing little blue footbridges. Between the doors into the living room and the dining room stood a grandmother clock that chimed the quarters, in and out of sequence with the clocks in other rooms, filling the house four times an hour with ethereal, ever-changing music.

And in the middle of it all, my friend Keith. The picture's no longer monochrome, evidently, because now I can see the colours of our belts. Keith's, also fastened with a metal snake curled into the shape of an S, has two yellow bands on the black background, mine two green bands. We're socially colour-coded for ease of reference. Yellow and black are the colours of the right local preparatory school, where all the boys are going to take, and pass, the Common Entrance exam to a public school, and where everyone has his own cricket bat, his own boots and pads, and a special long bag to put them in. Green and black are the colours of the wrong school, where half the boys are gangling oafs like my brother Geoff, who have already taken Common Entrance and failed, and where we play cricket with splintered communal bats – some of us wearing brown gym shoes and our ordinary grey shorts.

I was acutely aware, even then, of my incomprehensible good fortune in being Keith's friend. Now I think about it with adult hindsight it seems more surprising still. Not just his belt but everything about him was yellow and black; everything about me was plainly green and black. He was the officer corps in our two-man army. I was the

Other Ranks – and grateful to be so.

We had a great many enterprises and projects in hand, and in all of them he was the leader and I was the led. I see now that he was only the first in a whole series of dominant figures in my life whose disciple I became. His authority was entirely warranted by his intellectual and imaginative superiority. It was Keith, not me, who'd devised the overhead cableway that connected our two houses, along which messages could be catapulted back and forth, like bills and change in the local grocers, and who'd gone on to develop the amazing underground railway, operated by pneumatic pressure, like another cash system we'd seen on expeditions to a nearby department store, through which we could ourselves pass swiftly and effortlessly back and forth, unobserved by the rest of the neighbourhood. Or, at any rate, the cableway and pneumatic tubes along which we and our messages *would* pass, as soon we put the plans into effect.

It was Keith who'd discovered that Trewinnick, the mysterious house next to his with the perpetually drawn blackout, was occupied by the Juice, a sinister organisation apparently behind all kinds of plots and swindles. It was Keith who'd discovered, one Sunday evening on the railway embankment behind the houses, the secret passageway through which the Juice came and went. Or would have discovered in another moment or two, if his father hadn't ordered him to be home in time to pipeclay his cricket boots, ready for school in the morning.

So now Keith and Stephen are standing in the hall, amidst the darkness of the panelling and the gleam of the silver and the delicate chiming of the clocks, deciding what they're going to do this afternoon. Or rather Stephen's waiting for Keith to decide. He may have some chore imposed by his father, which Stephen will be allowed to help with. Maintaining his bicycle, for instance, or sweeping the floor around his father's workbench in the garage. The bicycle in particular requires a great deal of maintenance, because Keith cycles to school each day, and he has a special sports model which has to be kept oiled with special oil, and cleaned with special cleaners until its green frame gleams and its chromium handlebars and rims and three-speed hub glitter in the sun. Cycling's plainly the right way to go to school; the bus which Stephen catches each day at the cracked concrete bus stop on the main road is plainly the wrong way. Green's the right colour for a bicycle, just as it's the wrong one for a belt or a bus.

Or they might be going upstairs to shut themselves away in Keith's playroom. His playroom's as well ordered as the rest of the house. There are no stupid brothers or sisters to take up space and confuse everything, as there are in Stephen's house and all the other houses in the Close where there are children. All Keith's toys are his own, neatly ranged in drawers and cupboards, often in the boxes they came in. There's a deliciously rightful scent of watchmaker's oil from all the solidly engineered clockwork racing cars and speedboats. There are elaborate mechanical constructions, properly assembled from construction sets, with intermeshing cogwheels and ratchets and worm gears, and perfect scale models of Spitfires and Hurricanes properly built from kits, with celluloid canopies, and retractable undercarriages set in bellies of the most exquisite duck-egg blue. In some of the drawers are battery-powered gadgets – torches that shine in three different colours, and little optical instruments that pass light through lenses and prisms – all of them in actual working condition. There's a

shelf of boys' stories in which desert islands are colonised, missions flown in biplanes, and secret passages discovered. There's another shelf of books that tell you how to build a superheterodyne wireless set out of empty cigar boxes, and how to make an egg turn into a silk handkerchief.

If it's fine, and his father hasn't just cut the lawn, they might be going out to play in the garden. They're constructing a railway system which runs from the lowlands of the flower beds behind the garage up into the high mountain passes of the air-raid shelter, where spectacular bridges carry it over breathtaking gorges, then through the dangerous bandit country in the kitchen garden, and on down to the important industrial complex and dock installations behind the cucumber frame. Or will do, as soon as Keith has secured all the necessary way leaves from his father.

They might go out for a walk, up to the golf course, perhaps, where Keith has seen some strange wild animal, a kind of talking monkey, hiding among the gorse bushes, or to the smallholdings in Paradise, where he once saw a crashed German plane with the pilot sitting dead in the cockpit. As they walk they talk about their plans to build a man-carrying glider that can be launched from the roof, or a real car with a real steering wheel. The glider and the car have of course been designed by Keith, but the car's a project in which Stephen's actively involved, because it's to be powered by dozens of old clockwork motors not taken from Keith's inviolable toys but cannibalised from the ample supply of broken ones in Stephen's muddled toy cupboard.

There are a great many projects in hand and a great many mysteries to be investigated. One possibility, though, is too outlandish ever to be mooted – the idea of going to play at Stephen's house. What would be the point? There's no great intercontinental railway being driven through the uninteresting savannahs of *his* back garden, and the idea never crosses Stephen's mind of introducing anyone, least of all Keith, to the room in which he and Geoff not only play but sleep and do their homework. The presence of the two beds is unsuitable enough; Keith's bedroom is quite separate from his playroom. Worse is what's in and on and around the beds – a hopeless tangle of string and plasticine and electric flex and forgotten socks and dust, of old cardboard boxes of mouldering butterflies and broken birds' eggs left over from abandoned projects in the past.

I try to imagine the impossible happening, and Keith asking his mother if he might play at Stephen's house ... I laugh at the thought. His mother's reclining on the sofa in the sitting room, looking up from her library book. She raises her perfectly plucked eyebrows a quarter of an inch. What is she going to say?

Actually I know precisely what she's going to say: 'I think you'd better ask Daddy about that, darling.'

And what would Daddy say, if Keith somehow found reason and courage enough to persist with this preposterous request? Would he actually turn to look at Stephen for once, in sheer astonishment at the effrontery of the invitation? Of course not. Nor would he reply to the question. He'd simply say something like 'Have you oiled your cricket bat yet, old chap?' And that would be that; they'd go to the kitchen, ask Mrs Elmsley to give them a newspaper to spread over the floor, and they'd oil his cricket bat.

What puzzles me now I look back on it is that Keith's parents had ever allowed

their son to build underground tunnels and overhead cable cars to Stephen's house, to go birdsnesting and monkey hunting with him, to invite him to play with his perfectly cared-for toys and help clean his special sports bicycle. It's possible that his father had simply never noticed Stephen's existence, but his mother certainly had. She didn't speak to him personally, but she'd sometimes address him and Keith collectively, as 'you two' or 'chaps'. 'Would you two like a glass of milk?' she might say in the middle of the morning, looking at Keith. Or: 'Come on, chaps. Time to pack up your toys.' Sometimes she'd commission Keith to say something to Stephen individually on her behalf: 'Darling, doesn't Stephen have homework to do ...? Keith, precious, do you want to invite Stephen to stay to tea?'

She spoke softly and smilingly, with a kind of calm amusement at the world and no excessive movement of her lips. She spent a lot of the day with her feet up on the sofa, or resting in her bedroom, and rested is how she always seemed. She'd appear in the doorway of the playroom, rested, calm, and composed, to announce that she was going down the road to Auntie Dee's, or to the shops. 'You boys will be all right, won't you? You've got things to keep you occupied?' If she wasn't going to the shops or Auntie Dee's she'd be going to the post. She posted letters, it sometimes seemed to Stephen, several times a day.

Keith's father, on the other hand, spent the day working. Not in some unseen office, like Stephen's father and everybody else's father who wasn't away in the Services, but in the garden and the kitchen garden, and around the house, for ever digging and dunging, and trimming and pruning, for ever undercoating and painting, and wiring and rewiring, for ever making perfection yet more perfect. Even the chickens at the bottom of the garden lived irreproachably elegant lives, parading haughtily about a spacious kingdom defined by rectilinear walls of gleaming wire mesh, and retiring to lay clean brown eggs in a hen house where the familiar smells of feed and droppings mingled tastefully with the scent of fresh creosote without and fresh whitewash within.

The headquarters of Keith's father's operations, though, were the garage. The double doors at the front were never opened, but there was a small door in the side, just across the yard from the kitchen, and occasionally, standing behind Keith when he had to go and ask his father for permission to walk on the lawn, or lay out railway track on the paths, Stephen would catch a glimpse of the wonderful private kingdom inside. Keith's father would be intent upon some piece of wood or metal held fast in the great vice on his workbench, dextrously filing or sawing or planing; or sharpening his great range of chisels on a rotary grindstone; or searching in the hundred tidy drawers and pigeonholes above and around the bench for exactly the right grade of glass paper, exactly the right gauge of screw. A characteristic scent hung in the air. What was it? Sawdust, certainly, and machine oil. Swept concrete, perhaps. And car.

The car was another perfection – a small family saloon with constellations of chromium-plated fitments glittering in the darkness of the garage, its bodywork and engine spotlessly maintained in constant readiness for the end of the war, when there would be petrol to run it again. Sometimes the only part of Keith's father to be seen was his legs, projecting from a pool of light underneath the car, as he carried out the full regular schedule of checks and oil changes. All it was missing was its wheels. It stood in perfect immobility on four carefully carpentered wooden chocks, to prevent its being commandeered, as Keith explained, by invading Germans. The wheels

themselves were hung neatly on the wall, alongside a picnic hamper, tennis rackets in wooden presses, deflated airbeds and rubber rings – all the apparatus of a forgotten life of leisure which had been suspended, like so many things, for the Duration, that great overarching condition shaping all their lives in so many different ways.

Stephen once plucked up courage to ask Keith privately if the Germans, with the evil ingenuity for which they were notorious, might not take the wheels down from the wall and put them back on the car. Keith explained to him that the wheel nuts which secured them were locked away in a secret drawer by his father's bedside, together with the revolver with which he'd been armed when he was an officer in the Great War, and with which he was going to give any invading Germans this time a nasty surprise.

Keith's father worked and worked – and as he worked he whistled. He whistled as richly and effortlessly as a songbird, an infinitely complex, meandering tune that never reached a resting place any more than his work did. He rarely found a moment to speak. When he did, the words were quick and dry and impatient. 'Door – paint – wet,' he'd inform Keith's mother. If he was in a good mood he'd address Keith as 'old chap'. Sometimes this would become 'old boy', which had imperative overtones: 'Bike away in the shed, old boy.' Occasionally, though, his lips drew back to form what appeared to be a smile, and he'd call Keith 'old bean'. 'If that toy aeroplane of yours touches the greenhouse, old bean,' he'd smile, 'I'll cane you.' Keith evidently believed him. So did Stephen; there was a selection of canes waiting among the sticks and umbrellas on the rack in the hall. Stephen he never addressed at all – never so much as looked at. Even if it was Stephen who was threatening the damage to the greenhouse, it was Keith who was 'old bean' and Keith who'd get caned, because Stephen didn't exist. But then Stephen never spoke to him either, or even looked directly at him, whether he was smiling or not; perhaps because he was too frightened to, or perhaps because if you're non-existent you can't.

There were other reasons why Keith's father inspired respect. He'd won a medal in the Great War, Keith had told Stephen, for killing five Germans. He'd run them through with a bayonet, though exactly how his father had managed to attach a bayonet to the famous revolver Stephen didn't have the courage to ask. There the bayonet still was, though, chillingly bouncing on Keith's father's khaki-trousered buttock every weekend as he marched off in his Home Guard uniform; though it wasn't really the Home Guard that he was going to, as Keith had explained – it was to special undercover work for the Secret Service.

The Haywards were impeccable. And yet they tolerated Stephen! He was very possibly the only person in the Close who ever set foot inside their home, or even in their garden. I try to imagine Norman Stott clumping about Keith's playroom ... or Barbara Berrill being invited to tea ... My imagination flounders. I can't make it see even perfectly respectable and self-contained children like the Geest twins, or the pale musicians from No. 1, playing a decorous game of *he* among the rose beds. I can't picture any of the grown-ups there, for that matter. I stand behind Keith in my mind as he taps at the door of the sitting room ... 'Come in,' says his mother's voice, scarcely even raised. He opens the door to reveal, politely taking tea with his mother – who? Not Mrs Stott or Mrs Sheldon, obviously. Not my mother (think of *that*, now!). Not Mrs Pincher ...

No one. Not even Mrs Hardiment or Mrs McAfee.

But then it's impossible to imagine Keith's mother at any of the other houses in the Close.

Except at Auntie Dee's.

Auntie Dee was yet another amazing ornament of the Hayward family.

She lived three doors down, on the same side of the street, almost opposite Stephen's house, behind chocolate-brown half-timbering and flowering almond. My mother and the rest of the street knew her as Mrs Tracey. Keith's mother was tall; Auntie Dee was short. Keith's mother was unhurried and calmly smiling; Auntie Dee was always in a rush, and smiling not calmly at all, but with a reckless display of white teeth and cheerfulness. Keith's mother was back and forth to the shops all the time to get things for Auntie Dee as well as herself, because Auntie Dee was so tied by little Milly, and when she wasn't shopping she was in and out of Auntie Dee's looking after Milly while Auntie Dee went.

Sometimes Keith's mother would send Keith down the road in her place, carrying two or three new-laid eggs from that model hen house at the end of the garden, or a newspaper full of freshly cut spring greens, and Stephen would go with him. Auntie Dee's unguarded smile would light up as soon as she opened the door to us, and she'd speak, not just to Keith, but quite directly to both of us, as if I existed just as much as Keith did. 'Hello, Keith! You've had your hair cut! How smart! Hello, Stephen! Your Mummy said you and Geoff had both had terrible snuffles. Are you better now ...? Oh, I'm so glad! Sit down and play with Milly for a moment while I see if I can find you a slice of cake each.'

And Keith and I would sit awkwardly in the sitting room, amidst the muddle of baby toys on the floor, looking disapprovingly at Milly as she brought us her dolls and picture books, and tried to climb into our laps, as smiling and trustful as her mother. The house was almost as untidy as my own home. The back garden, outside the French windows, was even worse. The grass on the untended lawn was as high as the rusting croquet hoops left over from earlier summers. Keith always had one of his father's disapproving looks on his face while we were in Auntie Dee's house, his eyelids slightly lowered, his lips pursed, as if he were about to start whistling. As I understood it, though, this was no reflection upon his aunt's perfect aunt-likeness. Aunts were supposed to be welcoming, cheerful, and untidy. They were supposed to have little children who smiled at you and tried to climb into your lap. His disapproving look was simply the look that a properly brought-up nephew was supposed to have in an aunt's house. It was further evidence of his family's unshakeable correctness.

In any case, there was a reason for the untidiness. Auntie Dee and even the untidiness itself glowed with a kind of sacred light, like a saint and his attributes in a religious painting, because they reflected the glory of Uncle Peter.

There was a photograph of Uncle Peter in a silver frame on the mantelpiece, smiling the same recklessly open smile as Auntie Dee, his peaked RAF officer's cap set at an angle that echoed the recklessness of the smile. The Berrill girls' father was away in the army somewhere, the McAfees' son was doing his bit in the Far East. But no one had an absent relative who could compare with Uncle Peter. He was a bomber

pilot, and he'd flown on special missions over Germany so dangerous and so secret that Keith could only hint at them. Around the photograph were silver cups he'd won at various sports. On the shelves were rows of the adventure stories he'd kept from his boyhood, which Keith was sometimes allowed to borrow. His very absence was a kind of presence. He was manifest in the little silver brooch that Auntie Dee always had pinned to her breast, that showed the three famous initials on a blue enamel background, with the famous wings outspread around them and the famous crown above. You felt his cheerful bravery in Auntie Dee's own brave cheerfulness, his careless disregard for danger in the very untidiness of the house and the neglect of the garden.

It was only Keith's mother who went to Auntie Dee's, never his father. And Auntie Dee never went to Keith's house. The only time I saw Milly's pushchair waiting outside Keith's parents' front door was later – and I knew at once that something was wrong.

Not that there seemed to me anything strange about this lopsided arrangement at the time. The ways of the Haywards were no more open to questioning or comprehension than the domestic arrangements of the Holy Family. Perhaps not even Auntie Dee, in spite of Uncle Peter, was quite up to the standards demanded by God the father.

Only one guest was always welcome at Keith's house: teapot-eared Stephen, with the half-open mouth and the grimy tennis shoes.

*

Didn't Stephen love his own family, then? Didn't he appreciate at the time the qualities that he discovered in them later, and that affected him more and more deeply as he got older?

I don't think he ever thought about whether he loved them or not. They were his family, and that was all there was to it. I suppose he appreciated some of their qualities, because he had some kind of subconscious understanding that his disadvantages in life were a necessary condition of the enthralling difference between Keith's status in the world and his own. How could Stephen have admired Keith's effortless good fortune in being unencumbered with a brother, if he hadn't had to put up with one himself, if he hadn't had to listen to him trying out his new oaths all the time ('God in heaven', 'Jesus wept') and calling everything hell's own boring? Would he have perceived the grace and serenity of Keith's mother quite so clearly if his own hadn't spent most of the day in a faded apron, sighing and anxious, apparently unable to think about anything except Geoff's swearing and Stephen's whereabouts, and the filthy state of their room? Would even Uncle Peter have been quite such a perfect uncle if Stephen himself hadn't had to make do with a handful of obscure aunts in flowered dresses?

Stephen's father and Keith's presented a particularly piquant contrast. The presence of Stephen's father was scarcely noticeable. He was out at an office somewhere all day and often all evening, doing a job, too dull to describe, connected with controls on building materials. Once he'd been away on some business trip in the North for a whole year, and no one had ever talked about it or even noticed particularly. And even when he was at home he didn't whistle that terrifying whistle, he didn't call Stephen

‘old bean’ and threaten to cane him. He said very little. He often seemed like some mild-natured furry animal. He’d sit for hours at the dining-room table, with papers and files spread out in front of him, and a pair of reading glasses on the end of his nose, or else collapse into one of the scuffed armchairs in the lounge and silently doze through obscure concerts on the wireless that nobody else wanted to hear. He’d loosen his tie, and quantities of disorganised dark hair on his chest would come sprouting out of the open neck of his shirt. Then his head would sink and present the world with yet more disorganised hair, dotted in irregular tufts about the infertile landscape of his scalp. Even the backs of his hands had coarse dark hair on them – even the gaps between his turn-ups and his crumpled socks. His appearance was as unsatisfactory as Stephen’s.

Sometimes, when he was awake, he’d ask Stephen and Geoff politely what they’d been doing with themselves. He spoke slowly and carefully, as if he thought they might not understand him. And when he did finally become exasperated with them, the worst punishment he could contrive was a generalised swipe at their heads, which they effortlessly ducked. The cause of the exasperation was usually their room, and the muddle it was in, which he sometimes referred to as *coodle-moodle*. There was something embarrassingly private about this; no one else in the Close had ever uttered such a word. If Stephen argued back, and tried to insist that not clearing up the room saved time for more important matters such as homework, his father would occasionally produce an even more eccentric word: ‘*shnick-shnack*’. Stephen once repeated this to Keith, on perhaps the only occasion that he didn’t entirely believe something Keith had told him. ‘You know Auntie Dee’s baby?’ said Keith. ‘She was grown from a seed.’ ‘Shnick-shnack,’ said Stephen uncertainly, and he knew from the look on Keith’s face that he’d said the wrong thing once again.

I also remember the time Stephen told his father about the Juice moving into Trewinnick. His father gave him one of his long, thoughtful looks.

‘It’s true,’ said Stephen. ‘Keith said.’

His father laughed. ‘Oh, Keith said. In that case we need inquire no further. Shnick-shnack.’

No, Stephen must have loved his family, because loving your family was the ordinary arrangement in life, and everything in Stephen’s family, or so it seemed to him, even the *coodle-moodle*, was quite extraordinarily ordinary. But where he longed to be was at Keith’s house. And what he loved most at Keith’s house was being invited to tea.

Those teas! At once I taste the chocolate spread on the thick plank of bread. I feel in my fingertips the diamond pattern incised in the tumblers of lemon barley. I see the shining dark table in the dining room, where Keith and I are allowed to sit on our own, unfolding napkins from the bone napkin rings, helping ourselves from the tall jug of lemon barley covered by a lace weighted with four blue beads.

Between the silver candlesticks on the mantelpiece is a silver ashtray propped upright and inscribed ‘WWLTC. Senior Mixed Doubles. Runners-up – W. P. Hayward and R. J. Whitman, 27 July 1929.’ W. P. Hayward and R. J. Whitman, as Keith long ago explained, were his parents before they were married, and the WWLTC was the Wimbledon World Lawn Tennis Club. They would have been world champions if they hadn’t been somehow cheated out of it by another couple who were members of the same sinister organisation now entrenched in Trewinnick. On the sideboard, between

two cut-glass decanters, is Uncle Peter, in another silver frame. His smile's more restrained here in Keith's parents' house, and his officer's cap is straight. Every detail is sharp on the eagle, crown, and thickly embroidered laurel leaves above the peak, and on the pilot's wings above his left breast pocket.

At the end of an afternoon when Stephen has stayed to tea, Keith taps on the sitting-room door, and ushers him into his mother's presence to make his farewell speech. Balanced on an occasional table by the sofa is a tea tray of her own, with a silver teapot, a silver milk jug, and a little silver box containing tiny pills of saccharine. She's on the sofa, with her feet tucked up beneath her, reading her library book. Or she's sitting at a desk in the far corner, writing the letters she posts so copiously, watched by another dozen or so silver-framed family photographs ranged over the desk in front of her. Stephen doesn't dare look directly at anything in this holy place. Keith's mother glances up and smiles. 'Oh, is Stephen going home?' she asks Keith. 'You must invite him again another time.'

Stephen steps forward and delivers his speech. 'Thank you for having me,' he mumbles.

'As long as you both had fun together,' she says.

I don't suppose Stephen's words meant very much to him at the time, so let me say them again now, on his behalf, before everything that was going to happen happened. With sincere gratitude, and a sense of wonder at my good fortune that has grown only stronger over the years. Gratitude not only to Keith's mother, but to Keith himself, to all the others after him whose adjutant and audience I was, and to everyone else who wrote and performed the drama of life in which I had a small, often frightening, but always absorbing part:

Thank you for having me. Thank you, thank you.

So what was the source of that disconcerting perfume?

It wasn't the neat standard roses in the Haywards' front garden, nor the muddle of heaven knows what in ours. It wasn't the limes in front of the Hardiments, or the buddleia at the Stotts and the McAfees, or the honeysuckle at Mr Gort's and the Geests.

I walk slowly back down the street, looking at the houses opposite the Haywards, trying to be sure. It didn't come from No. 6 – that was the Berrills, and a barbed-wire entanglement of overgrown wild roses ... No. 5 was the Geests ... At No. 3 we're back to the Pinchers. So it can only have been this one, in between the Geests and the Pinchers, No. 4.

I stop and examine it carefully. The rustic sign on the wrought-iron gate says Meadowhurst, and there's not much garden visible apart from four neat tubs of geraniums and three cars parked on the flagged hard standing. The house itself looks unfamiliar to me. Its whole style is subtly different from all the other houses in the street – it was plainly built much later. Yes, this was the place – our Arcadia, our Atlantis, our Garden of Eden, the unclaimed territory left after Miss Durrant's house was gutted by a stray German incendiary bomb.

It was called Braemar in those days. Already, when Stephen and all the other children in the Close played there, the brambles and fireweed and dog-roses had begun to conceal the melancholy little landscape of uncleared rubble covering the

foundations of the house in which Miss Durrant had lived and died. The whole garden was running wild, like the Berrill girls, and the tall green hedge at the front, which Miss Durrant had kept so rectilinear, and behind which she had maintained her privacy so carefully, had lost its shape and grown into a straggling underwood that closed the entrance to this secret kingdom completely and lost it to the world.

Stephen spent a lot of time concealed in the midst of those unremarkable dull-green bushes that had once been a hedge. He scarcely noticed them, though. Not, at any rate, until some time towards the end of that June, when they came into blossom around him, and half-suffocated him with the coarse sweetness that would pursue him down the years.

I gaze at the four tubs of geraniums and the three cars. Of the bushes now there's no longer a trace. I can't help laughing at myself when I remember what they were, because the species is so commonplace, so despised and ridiculed, so associated with the repression and concealment of all the wild feelings it seems to have released in me. Let me say the name and get it out into the open, once and for all.

The source of all my great unrest is this: plain ordinary privet.

Where the story began, though, was where most of our projects and adventures began – at Keith's house. At the tea table, in fact – I can hear the soft clinking made by the four blue beads that weighted the lace cloth covering the tall jug of lemon barley ...

No, wait. I've got that wrong. The glass beads are clinking against the glass of the jug because the cover's stirring in the breeze. We're outside, in the middle of the morning, near the chicken run at the bottom of the garden, building the transcontinental railway.

Yes, because I can hear something else, as well – the trains on the real railway, as they emerge from the cutting on to the embankment above our heads just beyond the wire fence. I can see the showers of sparks they throw up from the live rail. The jug of lemon barley isn't our tea – it's our elevenses, waiting with two biscuits each on a tray his mother has brought us out from the house, and set down on the red brick path beside us. It's as she walks away, up the red brick path, that Keith so calmly and quietly drops his bombshell.

When is this? The sun's shining as the beads clink against the jug, but I have a feeling that there's still a trace of fallen apple blossom on the earthworks for the transcontinental railway, and that his mother's worried about whether we're warm enough out there. 'You'll come inside, chaps, won't you, if you get chilly?' May still, perhaps. Why aren't we at school? Perhaps it's a Saturday or a Sunday. No, there's the feel of a weekday morning in the air; it's unmistakable, even if the season isn't. Something that doesn't quite fit here, as so often when one tries to assemble different bits to make a whole.

Or have I got everything back to front? Had the policeman already happened before this?

It's so difficult to remember what order things occurred in – but if you can't remember *that*, then it's impossible to work out which led to which, and what the connection was. What I remember, when I examine my memory carefully, isn't a narrative at all. It's a collection of vivid particulars. Certain words spoken, certain objects glimpsed. Certain gestures and expressions. Certain moods, certain weathers,

certain times of day and states of light. Certain individual moments, which seem to mean so much, but which mean in fact so little until the hidden links between them have been found.

Where did the policeman come in the story? We watch him as he pedals slowly up the Close. His appearance has simultaneously justified all our suspicions and overtaken all our efforts, because he's coming to arrest Keith's mother ... No, no – that was earlier. We're running happily and innocently up the street beside him, and he represents nothing but the hope of a little excitement out of nowhere. He cycles right past all the houses, looking at each of them in turn, goes round the turning circle at the end, cycles back down the street ... and dismounts in front of No. 12. What I remember for sure is the look on Keith's mother's face, as we run in to tell her that there's a policeman going to Auntie Dee's. For a moment all her composure's gone. She looks ill and frightened. She's throwing the front door open and not walking but running down the street ...

I understand now, of course, that she and Auntie Dee and Mrs Berrill and the McAfees all lived in dread of policemen and telegraph boys, as everyone did then who had someone in the family away fighting. I've forgotten now what it had turned out to be – nothing to do with Uncle Peter, anyway. A complaint about Auntie Dee's blackout, I think. She was always rather slapdash about it.

Once again I see that look cross Keith's mother's face, and this time I think I see something else beside the fear. Something that reminds me of the look on Keith's face, when his father's discovered some dereliction in his duties towards his bicycle or his cricket gear; a suggestion of guilt. Or is memory being overwritten by hindsight once more?

If the policeman and the look *had* already happened, could they by any chance have planted the first seed of an idea in Keith's mind?

I think now that most probably Keith's words came out of nowhere, that they were spontaneously created in the moment they were uttered. That they were a blind leap of pure fantasy. Or of pure intuition. Or, like so many things, of both.

From those six random words, anyway, came everything that followed, brought forth simply by Keith's uttering them and by my hearing them. The rest of our lives was determined in that one brief moment as the beads clinked against the jug and Keith's mother walked away from us, through the brightness of the morning, over the last of the fallen white blossom on the red brick path, erect, composed, and invulnerable, and Keith watched her go, with the dreamy look in his eye that I remembered from the start of so many of our projects.

'My mother', he said reflectively, almost regretfully, 'is a German spy.'