VINTAGE

GROWING UP IN A WAR

BRYAN MAGEE

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About the Book

This utterely compelling memoir opens with a sceptical nine-year-old Bryan Magee being taught the facts of life. It goes on to tell the story of the Second World War as seen through a child's eyes. He experienced some of the earliest air raids on London, and his family home was bombed. Like more than a million other children, he was sent away as an evacuee, first to a tiny village and then to a market town, where he lived with two remarkable and very different families.

Growing Up in a War nostalgically evokes the atmostphere of wartime England, the community spirit of a society before television, where very few had cars or telephones. A kid from the East End, he won a scholarship to one of the country's ancient public schools and found the Battle of Britain raging overhead. During the school holidays, he returned to London and the air raids, the doodlebugs and V2 rockets. Wartime London is brought vividly to life, the streets teeming by day and empty at night, the theatres opening before blackout, and even the cheap restaurants conquering the challenges of rationing.

With the war over, Bryan's school sent him to a Lycée in Versailles, and he explores the Paris of those post-war years. Then, back in England but still at school, he tumbles into his first love affair, with an older woman. The book comes to an end with his call-up into the army, and his unexpected posting to the School of Military Intelligence.

About the Author

Bryan Magee has had a many-sided career. In the 1960's and 70's he worked in broadcasting as a current affairs reporter on ITV and a critic of the arts on BBC Radio 3. At one time he taught philosophy at Oxford, where he was a tutor at Balliol College. His best-remembered television programmes are two long series about philosophy: for the first he was awarded the Silver Medal of the Royal Television Society, while the book which he based on the second series was a bestseller. From 1974 to 1983 he was Member of Parliament for Leyton, first as Labour, then as a Social Democrat. He is now a full-time author. His last book, *Clouds of Glory*, was awarded the J.R. Ackerley Prize for autobiography. His others have been translated into more than twenty languages.

to
Richard Cavendish

GROWING UP IN A WAR

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PIMLICO

CHAPTER ONE

I WAS SITTING in a tree with Teddy Green, talking about what I was about to discover were the facts of life. At the top of it was an intertwining of branches that formed a wide-bottomed, broad-backed place to sit, like a throne; and whenever this was our tree for climbing, whichever one of us got there first took possession of the throne, while the other one sat astride a branch. It was a favourite place of ours. We would talk there for hours.

Today I was in the throne. One of us had just told a dirty joke, and I was reflecting aloud that these sorts of jokes were funny all right, but it was such a pity we had to base them on a silly pretence about some ridiculous thing that grown-ups were supposed to do.

Teddy gave me a look. He was a village boy, and was used to animals. The conversation went something like this.

'It's not silly. It's true.'

'Garn.'

'Yes it is.'

'Can't be.'

'They really do.'

'Gercha.'

'Really.'

'Corse they don't.'

'They do.'

'Get away.'

'I promise you.'

And so on, for a long time. Why I ever did start believing him I don't know. Perhaps it had something to do with his

manner and expression (he did, after all, know) and something to do with our ages (I was nine, he ten) and the fact that I had for so long been familiar with the ideas, and the meanings of all those naughty words (since I was about five), although it had never occurred to me to take them seriously. When, after many refusals, I accepted the truth of what he was saying, there was still a sense in which I could not believe it. How could grown-ups, of all people, do such a thing? Children, perhaps, yes, but grown-ups … How could they do it for laughing, quite apart from anything else? Did they titter and giggle all the time they were doing it? *Why* did they do it, if they wished they didn't have children? Come to think of it, it was a dirty thing to do, as well, joining up the things they pissed with. How could they *want* to do that? I was mystified. Enthroned at the top of the tree I gazed out over a wide, sunlit green field, awestricken by these revelations, struggling to take them in.

No doubt Teddy and I went on chattering, but I have no memory of what we said. I remember only my thoughts, though I expect I was putting them into words. If this really was how babies were born then it must be how I was born. And that … no … yes … they couldn't … they must … it meant my parents had done it!! The realisation was a thunderbolt. Never in my life had I been so gobsmacked. I tried to picture my mum and dad at it, and found this impossible. Yet I wouldn't be here if they hadn't, so I was a sort of living proof that they had. They must've.

In spite of my inability to conceive it, I arrived at the conclusion that my parents must have done it not once but twice – once for my sister and once for me. Of course, this was a very long time ago, and they had been different people then. Even so, it remained baffling beyond anything I had ever tried to get my mind round. And of course, there was the fact that they disliked one another, so that may have helped and made it easier for them. But I kept coming

back to the question of *why* they did it. My mother had never wanted children, and she certainly wished she'd never had us. Perhaps it had been my father who wanted us. He loved us, that was for sure; but what a thing to have to do to get us!

I felt like a traveller on foot who finds a range of mountains springing up around him. Problems heaved up on every side, whichever way I looked. *Everybody* had been born the same way. So my parents had. And this meant that my grandparents had done it … And Norman Tillson's parents … And all the boys' parents at school … And everyone's parents in the village … And everybody's in Hoxton … Everybody's … All the people that had ever existed since the beginning of the world. Obviously everybody who had ever had children had done it. And then, when the children grew up, most of them did it too; and then *they* had children themselves, and that's how the world carried on – in fact it's what the world *was*. Without it there wouldn't be a world, or at least there wouldn't be any people. It was a flabbergasting picture. The entire human world suddenly seemed phantasmagoric to me, grotesque.

I wandered around lost in these thoughts for days. As incredulity faded, it gave way to curiosity. I was sharing a bedroom with a girl called Gwen, a cousin of the Pammie Ainsworth who had wheeled me about in a pushchair when I was two. Gwen, who was eleven, slept on a divan in the diagonally opposite corner of my bedroom. I realised now that my grandmother was keeping us as far apart as she could. These were the earliest weeks of the Second World War, and we were having to go to bed by torchlight because of the blackout. Gwen and I would always natter together in the darkness before falling asleep, and sometimes, after my grandmother had gone to bed, we would get up again and play by the light of our torches, which we thought were

fun in themselves. Gwen was a whole year older than Teddy, so one night I asked her if she knew about this incredible thing grown-ups were supposed to do. She said she did. But did she realise, I persisted, that they actually did it? Yes, she said, she did know that. I found this disconcerting and encouraging at the same time. Why should you have to be grown up to do it, I wondered aloud – I mean, what would there be to stop the two of us doing it, right now? She said she couldn't think of anything that was stopping us. Well shall we have a go at it, I suggested, and see what it's like? She was game, in a way that gave me the impression that she had wondered about it already.

The first thing we needed to do was get our pyjama trousers off. Then we used our torches to examine the situation. I found she had something I had never seen before, pubic hair, and this held me up a bit. I was familiar with pubic hair as an idea, because it came into the jokes, but it had never occurred to me that people actually had it. I had frequently seen girls of my own age showing off what was under their knickers, and none of them had it. I moved the torch in to a close-up, and examined the hair in detail, fingering it with fascination. It made such an impression that it is the only part of Gwen I now remember – I have only the vaguest recollection of her face. When I questioned her about the hair she told me that all girls got it at about her age – and then, she supposed, they must have it for the rest of their lives. This was another revelation – my grandmother … my mother … my sister … they must all have this hair. In some huge, secret way everything was turning out to be different from what I thought – and altogether more gamy.

Eventually we moved on to the main agenda – or rather we tried to. My attempts to insert my penis into Gwen's vagina were completely unsuccessful. We tried and tried, but it was impossible to get it in. She did everything she could to help, holding herself open with the fingers of one

hand while trying to stuff me in with the other, but it was hopeless. My penis was a tiny little squashy thing that just flattened itself against her, while her vagina was dry and tight-lipped. It was as if we were trying to force a blancmange through a blocked keyhole. After trying and retrying, and re-retrying, we were flummoxed. How did people do it? Assuming they did, which we accepted, there must be some trick to it that we were missing. We were unable to think what it could be. It was all so hopeless that we never tried again. But the mystery went on puzzling me for quite some time. It was more than another year before someone (a seventeen-year-old girl) explained to me that erections made the difference. I had had erections, naturally, ever since I could remember, but only occasionally, and they had seemed to happen out of the blue, unconnected with anything else, like having a pain that then went away. It had never occurred to me to think of them in such a connection as this. In any case, they happened so seldom that I did not see how someone could expect to be having one just at the moment he needed it. Nor did I see, still, how he would be able to get it in to that tightly closed lock, even if he had one.

CHAPTER TWO

TOWARDS THE END of the 1930s it was obvious to most people in Britain that war was going to break out soon, and the only question was when. It was expected that Hitler would launch immediate air attacks against Britain's cities. (The air attacks came, but not immediately.) So the peacetime government began making plans for the defence of the civilian population, organising air-raid shelters and gas masks, and preparing the evacuation of children from those cities most likely to be targeted. To anyone with low expectations of bureaucracy, the high quality of the planning was disconcerting. Within four days of the outbreak of war something like one and a half million children had been removed by train in good order from the most vulnerable cities, and were billeted with families in safe areas. The organisation of the evacuation was based on schools, not on individual children or residential areas: whole schools, together with their teachers, moved to small non-industrial towns, or to cities beyond the range of bombing, and carried on their activities in makeshift surroundings such as church halls and assembly rooms, or disused large buildings of other kinds.

It was only because the civilian population had been put into a high state of preparedness beforehand that all this worked. There had been, inevitably, people who said that a Tory government was manipulating the population to prepare for a war it was planning; but this was the usual nonsense from what had become the usual quarters: few governments in history have tried harder to buy off

aggression by appeasement than that pre-war Conservative government. The critics of what were in fact highly civilised and sensible precautions were only too often apologists for Stalin's Russia, which at that juncture entered into an alliance with Nazi Germany, and was even then preparing a secret agreement with Hitler to divide up Poland and the Baltic states.

That is how it came about that in the summer of 1939 ordinary British families were discussing over their breakfast tables what action they were going to take when war broke out. Our family shop – which my grandfather owned, and worked in with my father – sold men's and boys' clothes. Since people were obviously going to go on needing clothes, it was assumed that the shop would continue trading. At the age of thirty-seven my father was unlikely to be called up early, and that was a blessing, because my grandfather would not have been able to run the shop by himself. If Dad were to volunteer, it was not likely that Grandad would be allowed to hire another able-bodied man to replace him. So the decision was reached that Dad would continue working in the shop until ordered by officialdom to do something else, at which point the family would reassess the situation in the light of whatever turned out to be the prevailing circumstances. But meanwhile, what about the children, my sister and me? The shop, which was where we lived, was in Hoxton, in the very heart of inner-city London, which everyone expected to be the most heavily bombed area. All the local schools were now forming plans to evacuate themselves on the outbreak of war, to as yet unknown destinations. Joan and I were automatically invited to go with ours. But there was nothing compulsory about all this. So should we go? If not, and our schools went, what would we do instead?

These questions were gone over repeatedly. My parents decided quickly enough to send us away from London for our own safety, but they were uncertain on what basis to do

that. In the end, differing decisions were made for the two of us. Joan, just now becoming a teenager, was at a good grammar school in Highbury, and it was decided that she should stay with it, because of the unlikelihood of finding a better school. At her age she would be able to manage if sent beyond the reach of visits by parents. But I was still only nine, and at a bog-standard elementary school round the corner from the shop, a school to which there was no reason for me to remain attached; so it was decided that there was no need for me to stay with my school. Perhaps it is worth remarking that these considerations, although they turned out to be less pressing than was thought, were by no means superfluous or unrealistic. Although the bombing did not begin until a year after the outbreak of war, when it came it demolished a third of Hoxton, which was one of the most heavily bombed areas in the country. The rooms in which we lived above our shop had their roof torn off by the blast from a direct hit on my school, which was totally demolished.

My grandparents were now in their sixties, and had been planning to retire quite soon in any case to a cottage in the country. At least, my grandmother regarded herself as having made this decision: with this in mind she had rented one of three newly built bungalows in a tiny village called Worth, in West Sussex. She got it on the cheap because a speculative builder had been left with it on his hands. It was a mile or so outside Three Bridges, and two or three miles from Crawley. The way you got there was by taking a train to Three Bridges from Victoria. In those days Three Bridges was little more than a railway junction, Crawley was a small and charming country town, and Worth a single street. Various members of the family, including me, had already been there for weekends. I have memories of a longer stay over the Easter of 1939, when I recall my delight at the colourfulness of the birds, and my pride and surprise at being able to identify many of them

from a set of pictures I had collected from my parents' cigarette packets.

The family decision was that, when war began, I and my grandmother should go down to Worth and live together there. It would be an already familiar home for me, within easy reach of London, in a place that my parents knew how to visit – whereas my school could well go to somewhere inaccessible. Worth had its village school, in which, we were told, all the children over eleven were taught in one room; but there was no junior school, so my father arranged that, like other Worth children of my age, I should go to school in Three Bridges.

Actually, I and my grandmother travelled down to Worth the day before war broke out. My father's sister Peggy had a friend, a secretary in Whitehall, who telephoned her to tell her that Germany was about to invade Poland; that Britain would immediately issue an ultimatum to Hitler to withdraw; that Hitler was expected to ignore the ultimatum; and that we would then declare war on Germany; and that all this was going to happen within the next few days. It did, but none of it was explained to me in advance, and I complained clamorously about being sent away from home when there was not even a war. My father, whom I trusted in everything, assured me that I could rely on war breaking out in a few days, and that it would be a good idea to go before the rush. So, at the age of nine, I left what had been my world until then, never to live in it again.

Since birth my home had been my birthplace, 276 Hoxton Street. This street was both the main and the market street of a whole distinctive area called Hoxton, one of London's Domesday Book villages that for centuries had nestled just outside the northern gates of the City. With the expansion of London after the Industrial Revolution it became the westernmost part of the East End; and by the time I came on the scene it was notorious throughout the country for its combination of poverty and crime. A report

published when my grandparents were young adults had famously declared: ‘Hoxton is the leading criminal quarter of London, and indeed of all England.’ But for me it had up to now been where I felt I belonged. I was at home in it, it was the only place I knew really well, and I loved it. It was to be largely wiped off the face of the earth in the few years after I left: what was not destroyed by German bombing was swept away in the post-war slum-clearance programmes; so today almost nothing of the Hoxton I grew up in remains. What goes under that name now is a quite different place even physically, with mostly different buildings and even different streets, in which much of the population is black; and what were warehouses when I was there have been turned into lofts and artists’ studios.

The first whisper of a realisation that everything had changed for me for ever did not sound until after Jimmy Ainsworth, who kept the pub nearest our shop, came down to Worth to bring his niece, Gwen, to stay with us. He told us confidently that the war would be over by Christmas, so the first time I saw my father after that I asked him if this was true, and he said no, the war would last for several years. *Years*, I thought. *Years!* How could a war last for years? Surely you had a jolly good fight, which settled everything, and then it was over. *What* could possibly go on for years? Still, if my father said so, it must be true. But I could form no understanding of it. And somehow the first beginnings of a realisation crept into my head that in these circumstances I could not form any expectations about going home again – in fact, I could not form any expectations about the future at all, neither the future in general nor my own in particular.

On the morning after my grandmother and I arrived in Worth, soon after eleven o’clock, an air-raid siren sounded. I knew what this meant, because we had had air-raid drill at school in London, and I assumed that the village was

having a drill. But my grandmother went into a panic such as I had never seen her in before. ‘Shut the windows! Shut the windows!’ she screamed, rushing to the nearest window and slamming it. For a moment I goggled at her uncomprehendingly; but she went on shouting at me while running from window to window (I had never seen her run before): ‘Don’t just stand there! Shut the windows in the bedrooms or we’ll be having poison gas in here!’ I opened my mouth to protest, but she yelled at me hysterically, and I did as I was told.

When every window had been tightly closed, checked and double-checked, I rejoined her in the living room, nonplussed that she should be reacting in such a way to a drill that she and I, there being no one else with us, had no need to take part in at all. What was the point, I wanted to know, of getting worked up like that about poison gas until there was a war on and there could actually *be* some poison gas?

‘There’ll be some gas all right,’ she said, still terrified. ‘Where’s your gas mask?’

‘But there isn’t a war yet.’

‘Yes there is.’

‘No there isn’t. It’s only a drill.’

‘It’s not a drill. It’s real.’

‘It can’t be real. The war hasn’t started yet.’

‘Yes it has.’

‘Eh?’

‘It started this morning.’

‘This *morning?*’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘Eleven o’clock.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I didn’t want to upset you. Run and get your gas mask.’

Even as a nine-year-old I was engulfed by a sense of the inanity of it. How could she have imagined she could keep

secret from me the fact that there was a war on? And if I was going to find out anyway, why not straight away?

At last, after what seemed an eternity of sitting in our living room, gas masks at the ready, waiting for the terrifying noise of aeroplanes, we heard the siren sound the all-clear. That unnecessary alert on the outbreak of war took place all over the country, and became a notorious event, because a population that was expecting instant air attack thought, *By Jesus, here it is!* and panic was widespread. Apparently some senior bureaucrat thought it would be a good idea, now that war had begun, to make sure that all the air-raid sirens were in good working order.

For the whole of the time I was with her, my grandmother tried to shield me from the war. Either she did not take a newspaper or, if she did, it was kept from me. When I was around she never listened to a radio news bulletin. When we went to the cinema in Crawley she timed our arrival so that we missed the newsreel; and if it came round as soon as the main film was finished she chivvied me out of my seat in an agitated manner: ‘Quick! Quick! We must go. We must leave.’ Since the newsreel always started with exciting action shots – bombs falling, guns firing, tanks charging – I always wanted to stay and see it, so I objected, and tried to dig in, but she would bundle me out physically. ‘Come on! Don’t hang about! We’ll miss the bus. We’ve got to go.’ It was against nature that I should be made actually to leave a cinema in the middle of a battle scene – and it could even be, in those earliest weeks of the war, a scene with horses, which was better still.

I was also at an age when I was beginning to follow intelligently some of the feature films I was seeing, instead of just absorbing them like blotting paper. The fact that I was for the first time seeing grown-up films without my parents made a difference. I became very aware of the music on the soundtrack, perhaps because I was getting so much less music than I had been used to at home. The

string tremolando that usually accompanied suspense fascinated me, and I assumed that there must be one instrument that made that sound. I asked people, ‘What is the instrument that goes *diddle-iddle-iddle-iddle-iddle?*’ but they could never answer the question to my satisfaction. To those who suggested it might be violins I said: ‘No, it doesn’t sound like a violin at all.’

CHAPTER THREE

IMMEDIATELY OUTSIDE THE back door of our cottage was a low hedge, then an open field. This was used by the children of the village as their playground. There would usually be separate groups of them, all ages and both sexes, doing different things. Even if something got under way that took up most of the space, like a football game, other children would go on playing round the edges of it, and get shouted at when they got in the way.

My grandmother kept a permanent eye on all this through the kitchen window. A couple of days after our arrival she led me out into the field through a gap in the hedge and shouted to the nearest children who looked as if they were roughly my age: ‘Here’s somebody for you to play with.’

They stopped what they were doing to gawp at me. They had seen me before, but only for a day here and a day there, with long absences in between, to forget.

‘His name’s Bryan,’ she said as she turned and went back into the house, leaving me standing there. Once she was out of the way they loosened up. ‘We’re playing so-and-so,’ said one of the boys, who remembered me. Two girls started talking at once to explain what they were doing. And before I knew where I was, I was in the game. It had been much the same on earlier visits. When my grandmother yelled to me from the kitchen door to come in and eat, I did not want to go.

‘Coming tomorrow?’ asked one of the boys as I walked away.

‘’Spec’ so.’

And so I was recruited, in what seemed an entirely natural way, into the gang of village children. We played together more or less every day after school, most often in the field, though frequently some of us would get up to some mischief elsewhere. My special friend became Teddy Green, who lived in one of the railway cottages at the far end of the field, fronting the main road. All the wage-earners there worked at the railway station in Three Bridges. Teddy said that when he grew up he was going to work for the railway in Three Bridges, just like his dad, and he did.

The hero among the children was a boy who played with them only occasionally, and I heard him talked about before I saw him. I took them to be calling him King Constable, and asked if that was really his name, and they said yes, it was. What a splendid name, I thought, for the chap who is obviously the chap of chaps. Actually they were saying Ken Constable, but I found this out only when he came to play with us and I heard them address him as Ken. He was a good-looking, strongly built fourteen-year-old who had left school that summer. This meant he was looked on by the rest of us as more or less grown-up. He had known the other children all their lives, but because they were younger he played with them only when he could find no one better to hang around with. Then he dominated them. He did everything better than they did, and they idolised him for it, and tried to emulate him. I, like the rest, imitated the way he played football. I had never played with such a big boy before – no such persons had ever deigned to take notice of me. I was overawed by him. Four years later he was drafted into the navy and killed. A plaque in the village church commemorates him.

The church played an essential part in our lives as the chief source of pocket money. I was told that if I joined the choir and attended regularly I would be given half a crown

for the period up to Christmas. The children in the choir got half a crown for each of the three terms in the year. I could scarcely believe it. I had never possessed anything like such a sum of money at once: I was used to getting money in ha'pennies and pennies, plus fourpence on Saturdays. Teddy told me he went to the vicarage every Saturday morning and cleaned all the boots and shoes, including those of the servants, and for this he was paid the unbelievable sum of sixpence. On top of that he got money from his parents. The village children were wallowing in money, it seemed to me, and the biggest sums of all came from the church. This was a revelation. I joined the choir immediately. Thus choir practices and church services became part of my life.

It was the first time I had been to grown-up services – I had been to weddings and Sunday school, but no one in my family went to ordinary church, so it was new to me. It surprised me that grown-ups were expected to kneel, though I noted that the hassocks provided for them to do it on were so high that they didn't have to do a really proper kneel. As a choirboy I was provided with a scarlet cassock and white surplice, an outfit I thought snazzy, especially the cassock. We processed a lot, walking behind a man carrying a cross, out of the main door, round the outside of the church, then back in again, singing as we went. No matter where we started, we always ended up in the same place as we began. I had no idea why we did this, nor indeed what any of it was about, but I was never bored, because there was always so much going on. There were the people in the church, for a start – although never full it was usually well attended. And there seemed to be some sort of indoor autumnal mist, so that the lights shining through it on to our red cassocks made everything look shimmery in a cheerful, Christmassy way. It was the first time I ever noticed chandeliers. And of course there was the music. But I discovered that my voice was awkwardly

positioned between treble and alto: if I sang with the trebles I could not get the high notes, and if I sang with the altos I could not get the low ones. What I did was sing treble and stop whenever it got too high. This meant I missed out on the best bits, the climaxes. On the other hand, if I got carried away, and strained to stay with the others to get up there, I made a croak that brought grimaces and shushing from the choirmaster. I half expected to be dropped from the choir for not fitting into it properly, but I never was. I went on having the same trouble with singing until my voice broke – whereupon I became too low for the tenor part and too high for the bass.

My grandmother came once to see me in my cassock and surplice, and told my father I looked angelic. Next time he visited us from London he came to church to see for himself. I could not take my eyes off him. His presence seemed to fill the church. He was, and always had been, the lodestar of my life, and I must have been missing him more than I consciously realised. Actually, I think he visited us on most Sundays, often with my grandfather, occasionally with my mother; but I was used to living with him and seeing him every day, and all I knew was that he was not there most of the time. But anyway, here he was now, and in a church of all places, something I knew he would not have done if it had not been for me. I noticed that he did not kneel. Afterwards he said how awful those hassocks were – people should either kneel or not kneel, not fudge it. From him I learnt that the church was unusually old – Saxon, he said – and famous with people who knew about churches. It was surprisingly big, apparently, for something as old as it was, and this showed that, although it was now in the middle of nowhere, the area round Worth must have been important at one time. It so happens that the church is considered by many the most beautiful cruciform Saxon church in England; but there would have been no way in which that could have been

made to mean anything to me. I just liked it, that was all. And it remains to this day the only church I have ever attended voluntarily and regularly.

The vicar was an irascible, dislikeable man. In the village it was said that more people would have gone to church had it not been for him. Teddy heard new gossip about him every Saturday morning from the servants in the vicarage: they said he had fits of uncontrollable temper in which he sometimes threw his dinner at his wife. When Teddy told my grandmother this it impressed her so much that she made occasional references to it in conversation with me for the rest of her life.

Teddy was my chief source of information about most things. It was he who introduced me to the crimes (literally) of scrumping and smoking. There was a few yards of the village street that constituted a bridge over one of the railway lines into Three Bridges, and Teddy and I liked to clamber down at that point and play along the line. Beside the railway, not far off, was an orchard and, this being autumn, apples were ripening. We raided that orchard several times, climbing over the wire fence with special joy because its purpose was to keep us out. It was the first time I felt my heart in my mouth. Climbing back again with armfuls of apples was much trickier, and we always managed to drop most of them. Even those we clung on to were a problem, because we could not eat them all, yet neither of us dared to take them home. We ended up stuffing ourselves with as many as we could – enough to make us ill, sometimes – and throwing the rest away. I found scrumping by far the most thrilling of all the things there were for us to do, and I wanted to do it more and more. A couple of times we were spotted by the man who owned the orchard, and he screamed at us through the trees, rushing towards us waving his arms. When this happened we panicked and hurtled like rabbits over the fence. Once I was not quick enough, and he grabbed me by

the collar and gave me a clip round the ear while yelling abuse into it. I was surprised to be let free – I expected something terrible and final to happen; to be arrested, handed over to the police. He must have complained to my grandmother, though, because she said something about it a day or two later. After that the scrumping expeditions became more exciting, because more forbidden and dangerous.

Smoking presented us with the same basic problem as scrumping. Cigarettes were sold only by the packet, and not even between us could we get through a whole packet at once, yet neither of us dared to take cigarettes home. So the question was, what to do with those we had not smoked? We felt the dilemma more keenly with cigarettes because they were so dear that it hurt us to throw them away. In the end, most often, we did – though only after having puffed our way frantically through enough to make us ill. We naturally discovered that the more fiercely we sucked a cigarette the quicker it burnt. And we lit one from another. They made us far sicker than the apples. There was a Saturday morning when we got through most of a packet of Craven A like this, and when I got home I was monumentally sick. My head in that lavatory bowl is almost as present to me now as it was then. I heaved my heart out, my grandmother standing over me, and me realising that I stank of cigarettes. The nausea felt terminal, like seasickness. The experience must have been something of a trauma for me, because never again, not even in my thirties when I was an addicted smoker, was I ever able to bring myself to touch a Craven A cigarette.

The shop where we bought our cigarettes was just outside the village. The man there explained to us that because the law forbade him to sell them to us he could let us have only the largest and most expensive packets, those of twenty, since to sell us fives or tens was not worth the risk to him. He could not even let us have the cheaper

packets of twenty – the smaller, more elegant cigarettes ‘for ladies’: it would have to be the bigger, full-priced ones. In Hoxton no sales would have been possible on that basis, but he made quite a lot of money out of the children of Worth.

Although as the offspring of two heavy smokers I had been pre-programmed, in the womb, for addiction, I had never smoked until now. At home there had been cigarettes lying about all over the place, and I had constantly been sent out to buy them, but my parents would have punished me so harshly if I had smoked that I never did. In fact I do not remember any children of my age in Hoxton smoking. It was probably a matter of money more than anything. It was an everyday thing to see grown-ups scavenging for cigarette ends in the gutter, in the same way as there were always children who would pick up apple cores. Nearly all grown-ups smoked, but it was a luxury for them, most of all for those who bought cigarettes in ones and twos. When I started smoking, at Worth, I could not understand why anyone did it. Cigarettes tasted disgusting, and caused my head to swim, and made me feel sick almost from the first puff. They also gave me a headache, and a burning throat, and made me cough. So why did people smoke if they were allowed to? How could anyone like it? I was aware that the only reason I smoked was that I was forbidden to, and thought that as soon as I was allowed to smoke I would stop.

Smoking was so much a part of everyday life in those days that it was a matter for remark if someone did not smoke. Like drinking, smoking was thought to oil the wheels of ordinary life. When people were offered cigarettes they said things like: ‘All right, I’ll have one just to be sociable.’ I knew only one or two grown-ups who did not smoke; but my grandmother was one of them, so any telltale signs of smoking in her bungalow would have been noticed. In any case, she did know I smoked – she asked

me, and I denied it, but I could see from her eyes that she knew I was lying.

The only other adult I knew who did not smoke was Miss Rutland, our neighbour in the bungalow next door. She was a thin little woman with a face like parchment, and seemed to me unimaginably old, at least ninety. In fact she must have been about sixty. She dressed always in black from head to foot, in clothes appropriate at the time of Queen Victoria's death, in mourning for her fiancé, who had been killed in the Boer War – which of course had taken place less than forty years earlier. However, although she looked ancient and funereal, she was on easy, friendly terms with the village children, and particularly with me, simply because I lived next door. She bought sweets and chocolate from a yellow van that used to come round – to give to 'the bairns', as she called us in her Scottish accent – and this may have had something to do with the fact that I would sometimes wander into her home. The two of us played games of our, or rather her, invention. She introduced me to one in which each in turn had to guess a tune from its rhythm. We sat beside a chest of drawers that had metal rings on its handles, and with one of these we tapped out the rhythm of a tune in staccato clicks. I started with the popular songs of the day, but she did not know them, she knew only hymn tunes, so I changed over to those. I was surprised at how often – sometimes almost immediately – I was able to identify one, out of the hundreds of tunes I knew, from just these tuneless taps; the words would come leaping into my head during the first line. I was receiving the lesson, without realising it, that there was a great deal more to even the simplest of tunes than its melodic line.

On my first visit to Miss Rutland, she showed me round her house, which included many photographs and other mementos of her fiancé. The man in the photographs was young enough to be her son or grandson now, and his funny old-fashioned army uniform located him in the world of

silent film comedy. One of her mementos was a paperknife he had given her, the handle of which was a military cartridge in its case. I was chilled by the sight of it: even to me as a nine-year-old it looked a horribly evil thing, obviously intended to kill someone like the young man himself. When I commented on it to my grandmother, she said that this was typical of the way people had thought during the Boer War, and even during the First World War, but no one would think like that nowadays.

My grandmother seemed not to know many people in the village, apart from Miss Rutland, but she was perfectly happy about that. Grandma was a tough old party, hard in character, and tightly closed up. Traumatic poverty in childhood had turned self-reliance and self-sufficiency into absolutes: you must never, never depend on others, never *need* others, because if you did you were done for. She had not much imagination, and no sense of humour; but very surprisingly, to me at least, she was aware of this: she was the only person I have ever known who said unaffectedly and truthfully that she had no sense of humour. When she said it, her voice had a note of wistfulness, almost of yearning: others were laughing, sparkle-eyed, and she would have loved to join in, but she remained outside it, not understanding. Her basic form of self-protection was to keep herself beyond reproach: always tell the truth, always keep your word, always be on time, always be meticulously honest about money, always obey the rules – not out of concern for others, but to keep yourself invulnerable. If you did these things no one would be able to get at you – or, if they did, you would be in the right, not they. To preserve this position she avoided anything that might bring pressure on her to compromise – discussion, explanation, consultation – and just got on with doing what she thought right, and presented everyone with fait accomplis. This was the thing I found hardest about living with her: I was never allowed to make a choice or express a preference.

Everything was presented to me as a settled decision, and all I could do was come to terms with it. Inevitably it made me feel excluded, alienated. But from her point of view, everything was being done in my best interests, as she thought it should be.

Throughout the time we were together at Worth, she seemed to me to be living in her own little air bubble. Most Sundays her son, my father, would come tootling down from London in his second-hand Austin 10, occasionally bringing her husband, my grandfather, with him, and thankfully seldom her daughter-in-law, my mother. And that made her content. On one such Sunday my grandfather was sitting in a deckchair in the garden reading a newspaper, my parents were in the house with my grandmother, and the car was parked outside the front gate. Teddy Green and I were playing in the street; and I, trusting that the garden hedge would prevent my grandfather from seeing us, started to show the car off to Teddy in whispers. 'And this,' I said, 'is the handbrake,' operating it to show how it worked – at which, in slow motion, the car rolled into the ditch under the hedge. My grandfather stirred. Teddy and I scuttled off into the brushwood opposite the house and hid behind trees, waiting in fear to observe the consequences of our actions (my action). Grandad emerged from the front gate and looked at the car, his jaw in his hand. Then he went into the house. Then everyone came out. My father was exasperated. 'How could that have happened? Did you see anybody?'

'No,' said my grandfather.

'Or hear anything?'

'No.'

It took all four of them a lot of heaving, and a lot of time, to get the car back on to the road, all talking at once while they were doing it, speculating on how this could have happened. At last, when it was done and the handbraking double-checked, they went back into the house. When I