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Stuff

Martin Rowson

MARTIN ROWSON

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STUFF

Martin Rowson is an award-winning political cartoonist whose work appears regularly in the *Guardian*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Scotsman*, the *Spectator*, the *Morning Star*, *Tribune*, *Index on Censorship* and *The New Humanist*. His previous publications include comic-book adaptations of The *Waste Land* and *Tristram Shandy*, and with Cape and Vintage a novel, *Snatches*, and a memoir, *Stuff*. *Fuck: The Human Odyssey* will be published by Cape in October 2008. He lives with his wife and their two teenage children in south-east London.

ALSO BY MARTIN ROWSON

Scenes from the Lives of the Great Socialists

Lower than Vermin: An Anatomy of Thatcher's Britain

The Waste Land

The Nodland Express (with Anna Clarke)

The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman

The Sweet Smell of Psychosis (with Will Self)

Imperial Exits (with Julius Cicatrix)

Purple Homicide (with John Sweeney)

Mugshots

Snatches

The Dog Allusion

For my parents – all of them – and, as always,
for Anna, Fred and Rose

We are such stuff As dreams are made on, and our little life Is rounded with a sleep.

The Tempest, Act 4, Scene 1

I didn’t tell my sister that I was writing this book until after I’d finished it. This failure on my part was entirely down to cowardice, as I wasn’t at all sure how she’d respond to me appropriating stuff – whether memories of our shared childhood, or our shared parents, their lives and their deaths – that more properly belong to both of us. Luckily for me, she doesn’t seem to have minded too much, but she made an interesting comment on what I’d written. She told me that she felt rather detached from the whole thing, as if she’d just reread a novel she hadn’t read since childhood.

I like that. It is, after all, almost exactly what I was trying to achieve in writing the thing in the first place. And while everything in this book is true, that doesn’t mean that it contains the whole truth, or even most of it. Nor is it necessarily the kind of truth you can depend on. It’s just the truth that I remember, or remember being told from the well of other people’s memories. To be more precise, it’s the truth as I remember it. But having put my hands up to the charge that I might be an unreliable witness, as far as I know it’s still all true.

And anyway, corroboration at this stage is hardly practical. Most of my original informants are now either dead or beyond reach. Where possible, however, I’ve done my best, and I need to thank all the people who either reminded me of things I’d forgotten or told me stuff I didn’t know in the first place; I also need to acknowledge those other people who were there at the time and to whom I showed the manuscript, for them to approve as a more or less accurate record; and also a third group who were kind enough to say they wanted to read more.

So, in no particular order, my thanks to Dawne and Douglas Waters, Anna Clarke, Fred Rowson, Rose Rowson, Jane Rowson, Jan Dendy, Charlie Adley, William and Jane Dorrell, Joyce Bridgeman, Ann Buttimore, Madeleine Marsh, Geoffrey Goodman, Clive Brazier, Andrew Bufka, Will Self and Patrick Wildgust. Thanks also, as usual, to my redoubtable agent David Miller (who, in addition to everything else, came up with the title), and to Dan Franklin and everyone else at Cape who helped with the production of this book.

I've been particularly careful with names, as in part they form a central theme to *Stuff*. To this end, I've only changed one name. If any of the named individuals in the following pages have issues with what I've remembered and how I've recorded it, that's what we have law courts for.

Martin Rowson
Lewisham

Dream

One afternoon in Palermo, nine months after my father died and five months after my stepmother had died too, I had a strange dream. In the dream I was in my late parents' house. In real life my sister and I had sold the house about a week previously to the property developer who lived next door, although for £300,000 less than my father had latterly dreamed that it was worth. Prior to selling it, we'd spent months procrastinating over how to clear it of the accumulated stuff of several lifetimes, my own included. Eventually, finally, we'd cleared the place, and the last time I'd been there, or would ever be there, the house was quite empty and unlike I'd ever known it.

Now, in the dream, I was standing in what had been my father's workroom. This, for the previous twenty years or so, had occupied the extension built on to the back of the house in the 1960s. In its time this room, about thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide, had served as a playroom, then a dining room, then a depository for all the things that couldn't, or shouldn't, find a place anywhere else in the house. Then, in retirement, my father had systemised the chaos into his workroom, even though he had another one upstairs, in addition to the garage, the shed, two greenhouses and all available space in the house or outside whenever he needed or wanted it.

Along the end wall of the room was a stack of about a hundred little plastic drawers containing washers, screws, nuts, bolts, nails and all the other bits and bobs he'd picked up, often literally off the pavement, over many years.

Beneath this was a table that had once been the base for a model railway set, never completed. In its new incarnation it was covered in more bits and bobs, fragments of old clocks, tools, oily rags, reused margarine tubs, magnifying glasses, strips of wood, pencils, keys and a lot else besides. Further into the room, for ten years up to his death, had stood an enormous doll's house which my father had started making for my daughter when she was four, and which he finished three months before he died, by which time my daughter was thirteen. Next to that was what had once been our dining-room table, acquired from our dead dentist's widow after my father sold our previous, rather beautifully ornate dining table. The dentist's widow's table had been covered in clamps, lathes, milling machines and other stuff, while behind it, against the south wall, had stood a huge industrial drill, more plastic drawers, some steel cupboards, an old chest of drawers on to the top of which, decades before, my father had bolted a huge vice. On the wall itself was a chart on how to build a turret clock. Above this, on the high windowsills of the small windows in the south wall, were stored old balances, broken electric clocks, empty whisky bottles whose shape or design had captured my father's fancy, old milk bottles kept for similar reasons, various unidentifiable pieces of scientific equipment and, as we'd discovered when we came to clear the room, nine bottles of horse's blood.

Further in still, about two-thirds of the way to the kitchen, was a cupboard which was meant to mark the borders of the workroom. It was filled with cardboard box files of photocopied sheets on clock and tool maintenance, company prospectuses, catalogues and similar pieces of ephemeral literature, along with more tools, lengths of wood, strips of metal, sheets of wood and metal, more mysterious scientific instruments, cans and jars of powerful corrosives and other liquids, a shoebox filled with little tins

of enamel paint of the kind used to paint model aeroplanes, paintbrushes, wire brushes, sticks, probes and much else. Leaning against the side of this cupboard were more sheets of wood and metal (there were also cardboard boxes overflowing with wood and metal beneath the various tables further back in the room), while on the kitchen side of the cupboard were more cupboards, containing Tupperware, Pyrex and crockery. On this side there was also a fridge, one of three in the area, which never contained anything except cans of fizzy drinks and boxes of chocolates. On top of the fridge were bottles of sherry, beer and wine, unopened. Straddling the border between the workroom and the kitchen stood my father's lathe, a monster of a machine, in which, with potentially fatal results, he'd once caught his tie and only just managed to turn the biggest lathe off before his face hit its moving parts.

Set into the north wall of the room were three large picture windows, looking out on to the garden and the mulberry tree my father had grown from a cutting he'd stolen from the fellows' garden in his old Cambridge college. Beneath the windowsill, running almost the length of the room, were more drawers, cardboard this time, containing yet more neatly sorted tools, lengths of wire, old plugs, carrier bags, sections of hosepipe and so on. Between the windows, in the little available wall space, hung several clocks, including two cuckoo clocks which I never remember working. On the windowsill itself stood my stepmother's single attempt to colonise the space, this halfhearted intrusion taking the form of pots and pots of orchids, mother-in-law's tongue and African violets, many of which she'd grown herself from cuttings she'd acquired, furtively with a thumbnail, from gardens round the world. Several decades previously she'd used the same space to breed guppies. To the west, at the end of the room, was the

door into the conservatory, the foundations of which, following my father's careful and exact instructions, I'd built when I was a student.

Everything that could be removed had now gone, and in my dream I surveyed the empty room, feeling just as sad as I'd done when I'd seen it in reality a few days before. In my dream I turned away from the window and the garden in the thin afternoon autumnal sunlight and then saw with dismay and growing alarm that the room hadn't been emptied after all. There, against the south wall, was the chest of drawers with the vice on top, and next to it was the vast drill. I was alone in the house and I started panicking. Everything was meant to go; the place was meant to be empty; my cousin Paul, who handily enough works in waste disposal, had dumped two tons of stuff nobody else could conceivably want, and yet somehow or other the fool had left all these things behind and I had no hope of moving them on my own.

Then, in my dream, I saw a dik-dik, a small African antelope, trot out from behind the chest of drawers. I stared at the creature in disbelief. My parents never told me they had a pet dik-dik. They'd never even given a hint that they were secretly keeping this animal. Why would they have kept such a thing from me? Worse, what was I meant to do with it now? Why had they left no *instructions* on its needs or welfare? For God's sake, what did it *eat*? Was I expected to take it *home* with me? What kind of *bedding* did it require? As the dik-dik snuffled round my feet I was gripped with a terrible, growing fear and I started twisting round where I stood in wide-eyed, lip-chewing desperation and horror.

Then a part of my mind, closer to consciousness or less anchored in dreams, started shouting in my head.

'Martin!' the other part of me cried. 'This is the stupidest fucking dream you've ever had! Now wake up!'

Earlier, on the morning of my stepmother's funeral, shortly before waking, I had another dream. It had been my parents' habit, whenever we arranged to meet either at my house, or somewhere between mine and theirs, to phone me to establish exactly which train they should catch and precisely when they should arrive. These details would then be repeated several times for purposes of clarification, and it used to annoy the hell out of me. Worse, they'd recently discovered conference mode on the phone, so my father would make the call and then switch to speakerphone so we could have a three-way conversation, most of which, inevitably, was inaudible.

In my dream my parents were asking me exactly what time they should arrive at the crematorium, and whether they should bring anything with them, and if they should what precisely should it be, while I kept on trying to get a word in edgeways. I finally managed to blurt out, 'I'm sorry! You can't come! You're both dead!' and instantly woke up in tears.

Just after my father died I dreamed he phoned me on a mobile phone (I didn't own one at the time) but it was a bad line and I couldn't hear him properly, and then the phone started to fall to pieces in my hand.

After my stepmother died, I dreamed my father phoned me again. I asked him where he was and if I could speak to my stepmother. He told me that she hadn't arrived yet because she was still too angry.

Some months after the dream in Palermo, I dreamed I was in Stanmore, where my parents had lived and where I grew up.

I loathe Stanmore, and tend to go into a mild kind of psychic shock whenever I go there. This is not because my parents lived there, although when my daughter was younger every time we neared the end of the A41, having driven across London and swung round the roundabout to head into Stanmore, she'd be violently sick. In fairness, this can be put down to her chronic predisposition to carsickness and because we'd invariably started the day with a full cooked English breakfast. This was because we could never quite depend on the quality of the lunch we could expect from my parents.

But the fount of my loathing is that I can remember what Stanmore used to be like in the early sixties when I was very small, even though it had been subsumed into the expanding London suburbs decades before. That expansion had been stopped by the war. In a field next to the roundabout where Rose was always sick stood some ruined brick Piranesian arches, which hinted at the picturesque but which were, in fact, all that had been built of a viaduct for an extension to the Northern Line that never happened. Despite a small amount of post-war reconstruction, much of Stanmore was still retarded in the 1930s, and much more was still like it must have been in the early years of the century, so that it didn't seem ridiculous, then, to carry on calling it a village.

In the high street, the 'Broadway', the pavement reared up in steep, sloping banks, beyond which stood low rows of small shops, like the newsagent's whose frontage, painted customs shed green, concaved in from the street, its windows punctuated with hatches and kiosks, with papers and periodicals hung by pegs from its guttering. Next to it was a fish-and-chip shop in a single-storey shack, and next to that was another single-storey building containing a greengrocer's which sold its wares off the top of upturned orange crates, draped with artificial greengrocer's grass,

an instance of innocent fraud which captivated me when I was a child. Further down the street was a petrol station of a kind unrecognisable even a few years later. Three pumps, looking like Futurist chess pawns, huddled on the pavement, each with an anaconda of rubber hose snaking from its flank up the side of the late-Georgian terraced house behind it up to a kind of gibbet hinged on to the front of the building just below the first-floor windows, allowing the hoses to swing out over the street below. The pumps also had little glass epaulettes on their shoulders which would fill up with petrol.

True, the coming consumerist apocalypse was hinted at by a desultory stab at a primitive kind of supermarket opposite one of the three pubs in the village, but we still had ditches on either side of our road, stinky, dank little creeks which seemed to justify the street's designation as a lane.

Then, when I was about six (shortly after I'd watched elephants walk down the high street to advertise a circus which had pitched its tents nearby in Edgware) the chip shop burned down, so the opportunity was seized to raze all the shops around it, including two of the pubs, and commence the ruination of the place.

If I seem to be painting a sentimental picture of this north London suburb, it's only because of what came next. My early childhood was no more idyllic than anyone else's, and my memories are almost certainly heavily subjective, but it remains objectively true that the buildings that replaced what had been there before seemed almost deliberately cavalier in their disregard for their surroundings. Where the chip shop, the newsagent's, the greengrocer's and one of the pubs once were now stands a fantastically ugly ten-storey-high late-sixties block out of all proportion to the buildings around it. Significantly, it once

housed the regional headquarters of the Department of the Environment.

In 1964 I sat on my mother's shoulders to watch Sir Alec Douglas-Home on a soapbox campaigning in the general election that year. He held his hustings in front of the Automobile Association's headquarters, an inoffensive 1930s building which the AA abandoned about twenty-five years ago for an enormous dark brown New Brutalist monstrosity built close by on the site where a toyshop had once been. This, in its turn, had been abandoned to a series of retailing ventures none of which ever seem to last long. In place of the original AA building is a branch of Sainsbury's, built in poor man's postmodernist style, all glass and steel and stupid sculptures by the hissing automatic doors, although most people tend to drive to Hatch End or Wealdstone to shop at the Waitrose or Tesco superstores designed, like all the others, to look like a short-sighted and rather dim prep-school teacher's idea of a Roman villa (plus clock tower). Which in its turn means that Stanmore has become more and more like a nightmarish film set out of *The Stepford Wives*, the shops existing purely to disguise the car parks built behind them.

But if the new shops are repulsive, the recent housing developments are far worse. Property prices in Stanmore started rising exponentially years ago, and although my father's dream of selling his house for a million quid was a bit ambitious, the house opposite sold for over a million shortly after he died. This has led to a mild crisis of supply and demand, which was resolved by the simple expedience of pulling down existing houses and building blocks of apartments in their place. On the site of the old RAF base (the Battle of Britain was directed from Bentley Priory just north of Stanmore on the borders with Bushey) there are now vast blockhouses, with little twiddly bits around the edges as a sop to domesticity, standing as a bizarre tribute to Stalinist baroque in north London. I presume they've been designed by a clique of Romanian architects who prospered under Ceausescu building ticky-tacky palaces, but have since fled their enraged and emancipated tenants for a better life in the West, and luckily for them they've found plenty of clients who admire both their vision and their relative cheapness. Or maybe they're the property developers' wives' second cousins.

A couple of years before my parents died, a row of fairly decent mock-Tudor semis round the corner from them was knocked down and another blockhouse built in its place, filled with tiny apartments (my parents went snooping round the show flats and said many of the dining rooms didn't have windows). In my dream I was walking past this new development when, again, my mobile phone (which I didn't own) rang, and it was my father, telling me that he and my stepmother were now inhabiting, if not exactly living in, one of these flats. I ran into the building and up a fire escape and there they were, wondering how to fit all the stuff from the old house into their new home. They gave me a cup of tea and a biscuit, and said how they'd been on holiday, but had then decided to move in here as it was

more manageable. Otherwise they were just pottering around as usual. I didn't want to ask them if they were dead or not, but I didn't have to, as they told me that they were, and so in the circumstances they'd thought it sensible to move. I started hyperventilating. 'But why didn't you *tell* me?'

Then I woke up.

When I was fourteen or fifteen, I would regularly have terrifying, apocalyptic dreams from which I'd wake shaken but relieved to be awake. I've now forgotten them all.

When I was a very small child I used to have the same dream over and over again. I would be standing on the edge of a vast forest of enormous trees, something like sequoias, with brown-grey trunks. They stood before me in a perfectly straight rank, spreading left and right into infinity. There was no space between the tree trunks to enter the forest, and behind me a formless, smooth plain stretched away into distant gloom. In the dream the point of view was looking downwards from high up in the trees, but below the line of foliage so that all that could be seen were the trunks themselves and the small figure of myself, simply standing looking at the trees. Nothing else happened, but the dream was truly horrible. I last had that dream in my early twenties.

Later, I'd have other recurring dreams, in one of which I'd find myself in a public place having forgotten to put my shoes on so I was only wearing my socks. In another, all would appear to be normal until I realised that the sun was shining high in the sky at midnight or one or two in the morning. Both dreams unsettled me.

When I was about eighteen or nineteen I was at home in Stanmore, lying in bed in the middle of night, when I woke

up and felt one of my teeth fall out. I immediately panicked, then woke up. Relieved that it was just a dream, I felt my teeth begin to fall out. Then I woke up. Then my teeth began to fall out. I woke up, got out of bed and went to the mirror above the sink in my bedroom and felt my front teeth, which came away in my fingers. Then I woke up. This continued through nine or ten levels of dream until I finally really woke up. My teeth were fine.

Around the same time I spent a whole night semi-conscious lying on top of my duvet, aware that my body was being picked to pieces molecule by molecule, but I suspect that this is because someone had dropped some acid into my drink at the party I'd been to the night before.

At the end of the Michaelmas term of my second year in Cambridge, when I had a rather nice set of rooms above hall, I was sleeping one afternoon, as I tended to do, when my dreams were intruded on by loud, incessantly rhythmic music. The person I'd been speaking to in my dream suddenly pulled out a knife and stabbed me through the heart. I woke up gibbering, the room filled with the music someone was playing in their room down the corridor. It was dark outside, the courtyards of the college dimly lit close to the ground and in a state of lingering terror I slunk off in search of someone to have a drink with.

In another recurring dream I dream that I can ride a bicycle, which I can't when I'm awake.

And since my mother died during an operation for a brain haemorrhage when I was ten, I've had the same dream every couple of years. She turns up out of the blue, and admits that she's been *hiding*. I had the dream in the months after my father and stepmother died, and last had it about a year after the dik-dik dream, in Istanbul. In the

dream my mother appeared in black and white, despite the rest of the dream being in full colour. I find these dreams oddly comforting.

For the record, all mammals dream. I'm told that someone's actually done the research and observed and noted that all mammals go through a period of rapid eye movement in their sleep, which is when we enter the realm of dreams. To be slightly more precise, all mammals dream except for monotremes, the order of egg-laying mammals whose only extant members are the duck-billed platypus and the echidna, or spiny anteater. They don't dream, and consequently have very poor short-term memories. This means that duck-billed platypuses often forget how to swim while they're swimming, and start sinking until they remember again. Again for the record, the duck-billed platypus is the only mammal, or proto-mammal, who is poisonous. The male has a spur on his back foot with which he can stab poison into an enemy, although with his bad memory he sometimes gets confused during lovemaking. The only other mammal with any toxic organ is the polar bear, whose liver, because of his diet of fish and blubber, contains poisonous levels of iodine. Most polar bears who die naturally die of liver cancer. The polar bear's poisonous liver cannot, however, be considered as an adequate defence against enemies, as it's only poisonous if you eat it, and the polar bear has no natural predators.

Given the fact that all mammals dream, I'm disinclined to read too much into dreams. If polar bears twitch in their sleep at terrible dreams about their livers, what conclusions can you reasonably draw? What do dik-diks dream of, and at the end of the day does it make any difference?

I once read of a theory about dreams. It posits the idea that mammals, who evolved contemporaneously with the

dinosaurs, evolved the capacity to dream as a defence mechanism. For countless millions of years dinosaurs occupied nearly all the available ecological niches, leaving the mammals no evolutionary room for manoeuvre, so they remained fixed in their initial condition as small, shrewlike creatures who were, moreover, nocturnal. This was because the dinosaurs needed sunlight to rouse them from their nightly torpor, so the shrew creatures had to feed at night to avoid the dinosaurs. During the daytime, while the dinosaurs prowled around looking for food, the shrew creatures had to keep very still and very quiet, and the best way to achieve this was for them to sleep. But because mammals have larger brains than members of the other taxa, the parts of the brain that remain unsleeping in order to keep the animal alive need something more. Hence dreams. In other words we dream simply and purely to keep us amused while we sleep, which we do in order to stop us getting eaten.

I doubt that this theory is right, but it will do for now.

And although many of my dreams still tend to take place in my parents' old house, my father visits my dreams less often. When he does, we usually just have a chat about nothing in particular. I'm always pleased to see him. But I know he's just a dream.

Time, then, to breathe some flesh into the ether.

Bones

But before we deal with the flesh, we shouldn't forget the bones.

There was a box of bones in my parents' loft, hidden away near the chimney breast on one of the dozens of dexion shelf units, nestling between a clock kit, some board games from the 1930s, old textbooks, OXO tins full of lead soldiers, most of whom were missing most of their limbs, rolls of gaudy 1970s wallpaper, more strange bits of scientific kit, specimen jars, lawn sprinklers and a very beautiful model of a Blackpool tram made by my Great-Uncle Jak, which I'd coveted since I was seven.

It's impossible to say whose bones they are, but it's likely they belonged to an Egyptian who died centuries ago. The peculiar conditions of the Sahara are perfect for the preparation of bones. Tiny creatures having long since devoured the flesh, the sands of the desert preserve the bones from further decay, and Egypt, under British suzerainty, was the source of almost all human skeletons for the teaching hospitals of London from the late nineteenth century until Egyptian independence, and my father would have taken receipt of the bones when he was a medical student at St Bartholomew's Hospital in the 1940s. Like everything else, he kept them.

The skull, however, is missing. Although my father promised it to me a couple of years before he died, it was nowhere to be found anywhere in the house. I doubt that he buried it in the garden, though if he had it would have added to an existing, if scattered, ossuary. In addition to

the skeletons of two dogs and countless guinea pigs and hamsters and mice and goldfish, there was also half a pig's skull, buried in the shrubbery about halfway down the garden, in the shade of one of the ancient oak trees. I know this because I buried it there myself, after a power cut had defrosted everything in the freezer, including the jointed parts of a half-pig, split longitudinally, which my parents had bought on an impulse driving back to London from Cambridge one afternoon. Having dumped all the other ruined food from the freezer, my father and I decided to bury the pig's half-head in order to confuse future generations of archaeologists.

Incidentally, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, several thousand tons of powdered mummified Egyptian cats were strewn over suburban English gardens as fertiliser.

Then there are my father's own bones. When he was four he fell victim to Perthes' disease, first described independently in 1910 by Doctors Legg, Calvé and Perthes. Up to that point this disorder of the hip in children from around four to twelve years of age was assumed to be a symptom of tuberculosis of the bone, except that in that latter case all the victims of the disease died. Anomalously, a small proportion of the children thus diagnosed didn't die, so a new diagnosis was required. I don't know why Dr Perthes pulled rank over Doctors Legg and Calvé and got his name on the disease which totally incapacitated my father for a decade and effectively stole his childhood from him.

If you contract Perthes' disease, for reasons still unknown, there is a temporary loss of the blood supply to the femoral head, or the ball section of the joint where the femur attaches to the socket in the hip. This section of the bone then dies. In the late 1920s the treatment for this

condition was to encase the child in plaster of Paris from the lower abdomen to halfway down the thigh, and wait for the blood supply to return and the bones to reossify, effectively fusing the top of the femur with the hip bone. This meant my father was bedridden from the age of four until about fourteen, and was transported around in a large pram. It also meant that, as an only child, he was transformed into a kind of doll for his mother to play with, and it didn't occur to anyone to teach him to read or write until he was ten or eleven. He didn't go to school until he was sixteen, although this didn't stop him from getting a place at Cambridge when he was nineteen. One consequence of his neglected education was that his spelling remained terrible and he always moved his lips when he was reading.

Another consequence was that he had a pronounced limp, as one leg was shorter than the other, and that he couldn't bend his left leg at the hip. In order to sit down, he required enough cushions to position his body in such a way as to accommodate this restriction on his movement, unless his leg could poke straight down at the side of the chair, in a kind of half-genuflection. I don't remember ever hearing him complain much about this, although it also meant that he couldn't run, so we never played sports together when I was a child. This might be a factor in what I'd like to believe is my innate contempt for competitive sports, all of which I continue to insist are inherently fascistic. I've passed the legacy down to my own children, and when he was about seven my son Fred said, out of nowhere in particular, 'I'm glad I've got a real daddy, and not some fat bald man who forces his children to play football in the park on Saturday mornings.'

By the time he reached his mid-fifties, the state of my father's hip was threatening to result in severe arthritis, so he underwent elective surgery to have one of the first hip

replacements. They sawed away the socket part of his hip and the top of his femur and replaced them with a titanium simulacrum, and he took to pedalling for twenty minutes every day on an exercise bike. Nobody really knew in the late 1970s how long a replacement hip would last, although my father and his metal hip outlived and outlasted four of his consultants, who were taken off by a series of heart attacks, car crashes or skiing accidents. And his legs were now the same length, although he continued to walk with a limp, albeit a *different* limp.

When I visited him in hospital after his operation, I asked to see the operation scar and commented that the surgeons had done a pretty poor job as the scar was distinctly jagged. This is the kind of conversation you have if you grow up in a medical household. He replied that it was fine by him, because when he was on the beach people would naturally assume that he'd survived an attack by a great white shark. Despite his disability he was always a keen swimmer, and his father had won medals for swimming in Manchester before the First World War.

When my sister and I went to the Co-op Funeral Directors in Wembley to arrange my father's funeral and cremation two days after he'd died, we remembered simultaneously that the titanium hip might pose complications in his incineration, or at the very least make it difficult to get the lid on the urn. The funeral director was unfazed, having clearly come across this kind of thing before, although she did ask if we wanted to keep the prosthesis, as some people apparently like to do. We declined.

It was only months later, in clearing the house, that I found a photograph of my father before he became ill. In sepia and grey, bleaching out towards faded ochre at the edge of the picture, a small boy in shorts is shouting joyously at the camera. It's the only photograph I've seen of him from his childhood where he isn't lying flat on his back,

wrapped in blankets on a kind of wickerwork gurney, staring sullenly into posterity.

My father's bones are now ash. He died of a pulmonary embolism three days short of his eightieth birthday. My stepmother's ash too. She died of cancer two months after her eighty-third birthday. My mother died, following her brain haemorrhage, aged thirty-nine. Jon, who'd been my best friend when we were seventeen and at school, died of a brain tumour a week before his forty-first birthday. My old schoolteacher Butti, who probably taught me more than anyone else I've ever known, although he never actually taught me in a classroom, died of a heart attack refereeing a rugby match in his mid-fifties. My wife Anna's father Russell died on Christmas morning 1999 in Charing Cross Hospital, of sepsis following elective surgery, two days after his eightieth birthday.

All of them are now ash, largely thanks to my great-grandfather, my father's grandfather Frederick Gittings Rowson, a prosperous plumber and builder from Lytham who got the contract to plumb the gas pipes into the first legal crematorium in England after the proselytisers and advocates of cremation finally overcame their opponents' religious objections, mostly centring round the Christian dogma of physical resurrection of the body during the Final Days. These well-intentioned people correctly saw cremation as a solution to the population explosion of corpses in the cemeteries of Victorian England, and I remember my father telling me that the principal apostle of cremation served time in prison after he illegally burned his late wife's body in his back garden. I've seen my great-grandfather's grave in Lytham churchyard, which also contains the remains of both his wives. Given the size of the tomb, they must all three have been cremated, although I don't know whether or not they were burned by flames