

The Landscape of Disappointment

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It was a Sunday morning in late October 1987 when my Dad called in advance of what was to become an unusual, and for me at least, a memorable journey. It was just after the great storm, when the wind kept us awake peppering our street with roof tiles and when a bleary morning revealed the full extent of a strange and powerful visitation, including the sight of giant beech trees uprooted and carelessly scattered here and there across the park. On a global scale it was low-level devastation, and it prompted the usual excitement about things temporarily disrupted. But, inside the lingering unease and mutterings about latent forces in a humdrum world, there was a kind of puzzlement at the absurdity of such a dramatic event happening in the here and now. For most of us, far away from those desperate frontline struggles played out in the news, life's great ongoing drama is its very ordinariness, that deep sea of oppressive familiarity within which we trawl for the mysteries of our being.

'Your mother and I are just leaving, we'll be there in about an hour'. My parents were driving south to my adopted home of Brighton from Fleet in Hampshire. They had moved there a few years before, finally escaping, or so they said at the time, the council estate on the outer edge of south west London where they had lived for almost forty years and where I had grown up. There was an unspoken but painfully obvious sense of irony about this move that in the end did so little to change their lives. A life-long socialist, and angry Margaret Thatcher-hater, my Dad had taken prompt advantage of one of the policies closest to her heart, the sale of council houses. Enshrined in the 'Housing Act' of 1980, the 'right to buy' became one of Thatcher's most symbolic victories over post-war socialism: more than 1.5 million homes having passed in to private hands since its inception. Back then, in 1984, my parents had quietly become part of Thatcher's 'property owning democracy' as she liked to call it, but it brought no clarity or real happiness to them in their last years, only a mild

confusion and an anxiety about not feeling at home in that cul-de-sac of bungalows in middle England. My mother's confidence, never very sturdy, grew weaker, as did her health, so that she would adopt a nervous, faltering politeness outside the family's comfort zone, wondering how to speak properly, like a child again, unsure of the right way to behave.

Some years later, after my parents had both died, I took a detour to visit the old house I had lived in for nearly twenty years. Drawn by the magnet of memories slightly softened over the years and fully expecting to enjoy sneering at some tasteless attempts at gentrification, I was confronted instead by a deeply depressing vision of neglect: peeling paint, overgrown garden, rubbish piling up by the garage my Dad had expertly built himself. And to complete the picture, a similarly weathered 'For Sale' sign that looked as if it had been there for a generation. I had always been aware of the effort that went into maintaining respectability in this house: the constant repairs, the decorating and, slowly, the permitted 'improvements' like the garage. And I remember the idea that we had some kind of position to uphold on the estate, somewhere above the people in the blocks of flats and the pre-fabs. Although there may have been some element of petty snobbery in this, it was more a feeling that we had an added responsibility to make the best of what had been given to us. Council estates, newly built after the war, were originally conceived as 'homes fit for heroes', aspirational for the young families who moved into them, and for many on the left, the beginning of a new phase of social development and key to a classless society of the future. For my parents, our estate had been a place of exile, away from the city and from memories of the Blitz, as indistinct and characterless as anywhere you could imagine: it was a place where they found and felt permanence and where my generation, growing into a new period of social upheaval, had become accustomed to not really knowing who or where they were.

'OK. Hope the traffic's alright, see you later'. Although this was no epic drive, some sixty miles at most, I always feared the worst, knowing how my Dad disliked any kind of interruption to the easy pattern of life he had retreated into. Even a clear road would inevitably throw up its minor obstacles, its all but invisible dramas to test his brittle plans and stimulate his huge appetite for disapproval. A missed turning, a slow moving vehicle, the momentary glare of another driver, all could provide this journey's spark of annoyance, usually inflicted on others as a kind of aggravating negativity.

It wasn't so much that life was intolerable for my father, it was that it had never quite matched up. I imagine for him, like a lot of people after the war, expectations had been high, and he'd come some way toward good things: in the early fifties setting his family up in that solid council house with its large garden; moving on in the building trade; getting a job at the Ministry of Works; even going to 'night-school' to do his surveyor's qualification. But then, too soon, he'd had to confront limits and problems that being honourable and conscientious made no impact on. And, as a result, so many of his not unreasonable plans had, for one reason or another, gone unfulfilled. This led to a gradual loss of faith in the shape of life. You could always get something from the small details, from the minutes and the hours, the routines, but a slow realisation settled in: nothing rich and unexpected could ever come, and certainly not through hard work or perseverance, that was just a fool's dream. It was more a matter of holding things together and closing down to manageable options: just get by, watch TV, go to the new supermarket, be grateful. For my father, the thwarting of simple hopes for ease and perfection, for something better, had become a leaden fact of life. It had to be accepted, but it was nevertheless a constant source of irritation and quiet despair.

I knew that they would take the motorway route, the quicker but relentless and joyless option. There was another way of course, one of the prettiest drives imaginable through West Sussex – via Petworth and Pulborough – adding ten

miles to the journey through light-dappled woods and rolling country. But, as part of his general loss of faith, my Dad had become accustomed to functional landscapes, to the non-descript scenery of outer London. In fact he was part of it: too long inured to the loss of places, to the grinding down of character in an area of piecemeal planning, free from architectural invention. He was also acutely conscious of where he might not belong, and of what uncertainties or indefinable longings random instances of beauty might summon in him. He was happier in places that demanded no response, places of pure process, of transit, of waiting and parking. And in this, motorways, despite their reservoir of potential problems, made perfect sense – they were functional, brutally honest even, and without pretension (that most damning of all things). My Dad was determined to endure motorways even when he didn't have to, even when he had the time to avoid them. He suffered them as he suffered his own faded ideals and ambitions. Motorways had once been closely associated with hope, with an ideal of Britain's bright modern future. Now they were emotional outposts, one of those barren extremes of contemporary experience, offering nothing more than head-down driving punctuated by fearful short stops in the fumey, oil-stained landscapes of disappointment.

This is why I wasn't surprised when there was a knock on the door just over an hour later. 'I've been around the block three times and there's nowhere to park. Your mother can't walk far with her knees and I can't leave the car in the road'. It wasn't the red-faced rage I'd learned to expect in these circumstances. This time it was a strangely vacant look, but with beads of sweat beginning to mass on his forehead. 'You can double park next to mine Dad'. I could see my mother's face staring from the car window, close to tears I thought, desperate to see her granddaughter but powerless to intervene. The onset of arthritis had made her even more dependent, she had bowed slightly and was diminished: she had that shrunken look elderly people get when illness closes its fist around them. 'No, I'll just have to drive round for hours until I find something. Total

waste of time. What kind of a place do you call this anyway; someone should do something about it. Your mother can't wait that long, she's upset already'.

As he turned to walk back to the car, my mother's eyes now fixed forward, struggling to contain her frustration and hold back those tears, I remembered what a heady sense of freedom owning a car for the first time had brought to our family in the early sixties. It was still the age of 'care-free motoring', of Sunday excursions that opened out the week with the promise of places larger and brighter than ours, with a sense of space, with clouds of chilled air in winter and scented warm winds in summer. It was the sheer pleasure of escape. Our destinations on those Sunday outings were places such as Oxshott Woods near Esher, with its pine trees and vast sandpit; Chobham Common, a windswept heath of heather and gorse, the wildest place I'd ever been; the majestic Richmond Park; and best of all, Bushy Park, between Hampton Court and Twickenham, with its avenues of horse-chestnuts, its vast, open fields of long grass, its lanes trailing off into places I'd never ventured and could never imagine. It seemed a world in itself and to a child one without limits. There was a real strangeness in coming across one of the park's far-flung boundary fences, like the sudden breaking of a spell, the dividing point between verdant fantasy and reality's dull limitations. In contrast to our estate's rough playing fields, with their ever-present threat of casual violence, Bushy Park's cricket greens, glowing in summer heat, were like some dream vision. And even more exotic, the shimmering mirage of far away baseball games, played by American servicemen from a nearby airbase, now such a dim memory I may have invented it.

As time went on and especially after my two older sisters had left home, these outings, and the excitement that went with them, became more infrequent. Dad would increasingly decide, as our Sunday lunch was cleared away, that he didn't want to go anywhere – he'd rather doze in front of the TV all afternoon, with a paper unread on his lap, lolling on into the evening while the light

gradually faded and another replica week began again. It didn't seem at the time as though he was exercising a deliberate form of control, although arguments often provoked his lethargy, and I couldn't really deny the fact that he was by Sunday often exhausted by the pressures of working long hours and, financially, keeping everything together. When he came home in the evening I remember the inky smell of offices on his clothes, the weary look in his eyes, and the dead weight of his briefcase hanging there on his arm. No, what was much more upsetting for me and I think for my mother, was that he didn't seem to understand, or maybe he had just forgotten how important these small expeditions were for us and how they fed colour into the creeping, pallid complexion of everything. My own longing to free myself from this unconscious control, from this mind-numbing lethargy and from the landscape I so associated with it, was born in these frustrated Sunday afternoons, when I would invariably end up dribbling a football like a maniac in tight circles around our back garden, lap after lap, for hours and hours, wearing a signatory path of mud on the lawn.

I suspected they wouldn't come back. My Dad seemed past the point of reason or compromise: battling with his own anger and undercurrents of despair he wanted to make things worse for everyone. Having made the decision to drive back, having come all that way without seeing us, without stopping, I imagined his mood would have calmed – the boiling point of turning around having past, he could now relax. I found out later that they had stopped for some tea at a Happy Eater somewhere and had had what my Dad felt able to call 'a nice drive home'. I didn't speak to my Mum about it, not then, not ever. The whole journey, that non-visit, exists in a realm of half-truth for me; it's part of a vague but sprawling image, an entire architecture of feeling and unfocused regret extending far beyond that specific episode, which now lays buried under the years of my own family's history.

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After staring at the old house for a while, as the sad state of the place sunk in, I decided, unaccountably, to knock at the front door; in that split second imagining I would pose as a double-glazing salesman or maybe a prospective buyer. It turned out the place was empty and so, again on an impulse, I tried the garage door, which was unlocked. Making my way through the garage towards the back of the house I became aware of a subtle change in the atmosphere, a lightening of the space that, as I opened the door into the garden, turned into a eye-stinging glare. The entire garden was dusted with pale pink cherry blossom from the enormous and perfectly dome-shaped tree that my mother had planted herself in the early 1950s, a few years before I was born. Every year its blossom had grown more bountiful, to a point where it took on a surreal quality, a candy-floss hallucination that spread its wings far into the adjoining gardens. My mother had loved that cherry tree, one of her great gardening successes, but she also found its spring effusion embarrassing, and not just because of the 'mess' it made in our neighbours' gardens: it was more that the tree's thriving might be seen as some form of showy pride. It was as if the tree was wilfully ignoring my mother's innate sense of moderation, or as if an unrestrained, passionate side of her own nature bloomed uncontrollably each year for everyone to see. There is a photograph of me, aged about eight, climbing the tree, perched awkwardly amid the best of its blossom. Even for an eight-year-old I look ridiculous, but my wild grinning at the camera suggests it was all part of some big joke, a mad alternative image to the strong, agile child, toy sword in hand, scaling a mighty oak. I remember that my Dad was the photographer on that occasion, and I like to think that we were laughing together then, that he had said something I found hilarious and that we were enjoying the tree's grand immoderate moment as some sort of shared rebellion.

Limiting his expectations was my father's longer-term rebellion, his own form of resistance to a world where abject failure, whether deserved or not, was always hovering just out of sight, ready to unleash all its imaginable humiliations. The

war had given his generation a vivid picture of how frail things can be, how horribly weak and insubstantial bodies and buildings are, and seeing things more simply in black and white – all shadings and saturations of colour necessarily removed – was my father's plan for the protection of himself and his family against rampant uncertainty. Despite all his intolerance, his anger and frustration, I always thought I understood these deeper currents of vulnerability and kindness, and never felt unable to love him.

I left the garden and decide to walk for a while longer around the estate, partly to check the real geography of the place against my memory's fast-fading map and partly just to see what had changed, and perhaps to confirm my worst fears. In fact very little had changed and the state of neglect was certainly not confined to our house. The estate had not thrived, no blossoming here, and it seemed to me then that all the houses and flats, both new and old, were like ruins, stranded here with no possible future or hope of redemption. I realised, too, that the stature of the people I'd grown up with (many of whom may still live on the estate) would have been similarly eroded by the passage of time, now deemed part of the 'underclass' and categorised as adrift themselves.

As a child I remember feeling pleased, and relieved that our street could be found in the London A to Z, albeit on one of those paler un-thumbed pages of the outer zones. It seemed to confirm our urban associations, and credentials, the basis of an identity that was, stuck in the middle of nowhere, otherwise hard to justify. Later I always claimed to be a Londoner, but in fact never was. Until I began to make my first tentative forays 'into town' at the age of fourteen or fifteen, my only experience of London was gazing out of our car window on annual trips to my uncle's place in Essex. A diagonal drive through the city that, to my amazement, took us into the heart of the West End at night, and, through dense traffic, slowly across what was for me the wondrous and incandescent Piccadilly Circus. Looking out at London in this way, frame by frame through the rear window of our old Morris Oxford, was not only my awakening to the

seductive rhythms of the city, it was in 1963 my first formative encounter with the pure pleasure of detached observation. There are echoes of this intensity of feeling in my experience of the city now as it is regenerated, only this time the spectacle is more enveloping and unnerving. As central London shines more brightly on the international stage, and as its hinterlands grow ever outward, the spaces it originally expanded into and the indeterminate places that were born in that process are prone to fall out of time. No doubt our estate, and the dwindling evidence of my past, will eventually be swallowed up by London's second city, Heathrow Airport, the real city of the future. Until then there is just the slow decline, the emptying out, and the long, long process of forgetting.