

Sublime Lunacy: Reflections on a well-spent life

By John Cooke

(Excerpt)

My friend Sandy bears not the least resemblance to Dr. Johnson. It is, therefore, scarcely surprising that the idea of becoming his Boswell had never crossed my mind — that is, until one warm summer evening some years ago at his castle in France. The occasion remains fresh in my memory.

We have dined long and well, to which the empty bottles ranged along the great trestle table on the terrace stand mute but eloquent testimony. The sun hangs lazily above the horizon, seemingly loath to leave us, as it so often does in this part of Europe. Above us looms the dark mass of the château, its one remaining tower casting long shadows across the flagstones, a stark reminder that this was once a baronial stronghold. Below us the French countryside stretches out in every direction as the birds and insects sing their final paeans to the departing day above the valley of the river Creuse.

The conversation is brisk, effervescent and volatile as usual, flitting easily from topic to topic, like a butterfly exploring blossoms, pausing briefly to sip nectar here, before moving on to draw more deeply elsewhere. A passing remark is all it takes. Suddenly, a Proustian beam of remembrance will penetrate the darkness, and in the accumulated debris cluttering the attic of his memory, light upon some dormant image that has long lain undisturbed. Released from its bondage of forgetfulness by the delicate kiss of a fine vintage, another story surfaces — and then another still.

I no longer recall — if indeed I ever knew — what particular remark had caused the conversation to move to Libya that evening — perhaps it was Greek mythology? Or could it have been oil — or perhaps terrorism? . I know not, but I recall vividly the scene that triggered my determination to start recording a few of his anecdotes before Father Time comes calling and obliterates all trace of them

It was part of a longer narrative — one that like so many others, involved a journey in search of spiders, for natural history in general, and spiders in particular had been his passion since childhood. Sandy told of a visit to a desert oasis renowned in ancient times as the fabled Garden of the Hesperides. Here, in a cool cavern deep underground, he had stood on the banks of the subterranean stream believed by the ancient Greeks to be the River Lethe. Here in the eternal darkness he strained, he said, to catch a glimpse of Charon ferrying the souls of the damned across the waters of forgetfulness to Hades — but without success. Neither, he assured us, did he see three-headed Cerberus. However, as evidence, that like Hercules before him, he had returned safely from the underworld, he brought back a blind white crayfish that would later be recognised as a species hitherto unknown to science and christened at the Natural History Museum in London under the name of *Typhlocaris lethe*.

I have known Sandy for many years — we share the same birthday — and I have been party to many of his deeds and misdeeds. Yet is only since that memorable

evening in France that I have consciously tried to recall the high points of his enviably rich life. Even so, the river of forgetfulness has reclaimed far too many stories of note.

As a child — and his childhood, I should add, extended far in adolescence, if not well beyond — he was shy and withdrawn. By his own admission he was Kipling's *Cuchundra*, the musk rat who never comes out into the middle of the floor, but always creeps round by the wall. He sought the shadows, insecure in company, always anxious to avoid the public gaze. I find it difficult to reconcile this awkward youth with the seemingly assured and self-confident image that has emerged with the passage of time

Sandy, so known to only his most intimate inner circle, has long demonstrated a fine disregard for convention. He happily assumed his mother's maiden name as his own for no better reason than that her side of the family possessed among its ancestors an Elizabethan nobleman whose eccentricities appealed to him. He held that Sir Henry Lee, of whom John Aubrey, the diarist, wrote "Sir Henry never married, but kept young ladies to read to him in bed," made a worthy predecessor.

Diplomat, poet, and courtier, Sir Henry of Ditchly Park in Oxfordshire was Queen's Champion and Master of the Royal Ordinance. His tomb, in Spelsbury Church, is surrounded by the kneeling effigies of his mistress, Anne Vavasour, and his children. The inscription, reports Aubrey, reads

*"Here lies that good old knight Sir Harry,
Who loved well, but did not marry.
Whilst he lived and had his feeling,
She did lie and he was kneeling.
Now he's dead and cannot feel,
He doth lie, and she doth kneel."*

Sandy's mother long harboured the conviction that it could only have been some clerical carelessness or administrative oversight in the distant past that had allowed the Ditchly estate to be mistakenly bequeathed to some other — and in her eyes at least — less deserving branch of the family. However, after the war she consoled herself with the thought of how impossible the dusting would have been in so great a mansion with staff impossible to find.

Even among the unconventional university wives that thrive in North Oxford, his mother stood out from the crowd. Trained as a singer in Florence, she had a love of the stage, and was in frequent demand by the many dramatic productions with which the Oxford summer is blessed. I can see her now, clad in full nun's habit, setting off on her motorcycle, wimple flapping in the breeze, clutching a lighted cigarette between fingers brightly adorned with vivid nail polish.

Her professional training had given her a voice that was clear, even if normally soft. However, she also possessed a stage whisper that rendered the telephone utterly redundant. It was a formal occasion in the Great Library at Blenheim Palace — a meeting of the British Medical Association, I believe — at which many university dignitaries were present, all in full evening dress.

As sometimes happens in such assemblies, there can be a passing moment when all conversation ceases. It was in just such a transient instant of silence that her eyes alighted upon the unwelcome figure of the Estates Bursar of St. John's College.

St. Johns (sometimes unkindly referred to as St. Rachman's College, in memory of a notorious London slum landlord) owns much of North Oxford, and the bursar was embroiled in a somewhat acrimonious financial dispute involving the family home. Every head in the substantial crowd turned to look as a lone female voice echoed from one end of the library to the other saying "My God! There's that bastard!" She apparently enjoyed the moment rather more than the object of her contempt.

However, she was not wholly immune to embarrassment, and would recount how one day during the war she had encountered the wife of the hospital administrator, a somewhat self-important lady, sensitive of her non-academic status. It is always said that in Oxford one can dress as one likes, provided one never apologises. Seemingly ignorant of local custom, the Administrator's wife is profusely apologetic for her appearance. "Oh," gushes Sandy's mother, "we all look ragbags in wartime, don't we?" "I mean," came the cold reply, "that I've just had all my teeth out!"

Those of us close to Sandy know the true story of the acquisition of his château, but for the benefit of his American guests he would sometimes embroider a more romantic, albeit utterly fanciful, explanation of how he and his wife came to occupy so imposing an historic pile. While there can be no question that his ancestors successfully survived the Hundred Years War (1337 -1456) there is also no firm historical evidence that they ever actually participated in it. Applying a statistical line of reasoning, seasoned with no little fantasy, he would argue with those who might be inclined to question the accuracy of his assertion, that the small population of England following the Black Death, combined with the evident quality of his known ancestors, made it highly probable that members of his family had joined the Black Prince in his victory at the battle of Poitiers in 1356.

"You will recall," he said, adopting his professorial demeanour, "that in the Hundred Years War England's Plantagenet kings, successors to the throne of William the Conqueror, were fighting to reclaim what they considered to be their ancestral lands — lands to which the kings of France also laid claim. At the heart of the conflict lay the question of whether royal inheritance in France could, or could not, pass through the female line. Edward II of England laid claim to French lands through his marriage to the daughter of Phillip IV of France after her brother died without an heir in 1328. French nobles, quoting the harsh Salic Law of Clovis I (481-511) disputed Edward's claim — the theme, you will recall, of the opening scene in Shakespeare's *King Henry Vth*. The result was war. When the Black Prince, the son of Edward III defeated John II of France at Poitiers the great Duchy of Aquitaine passed once more into English hands."

So it was, he embroidered, that in the rape and pillage that followed the battle his ancestors had (albeit briefly) acquired (or more properly seized) the lands of the noble d'Alogny family. That being so, he maintained, he had merely reclaimed the ancestral family home, and was even now busily engaged in making good some nine-hundred years of neglect to the fabric.

The actual circumstances of the château's purchase were somewhat more prosaic and conventional.

Sandy has told me several times that he himself had always intended to commit his memoirs to paper, but as he put it, sloth and indolence supervened, and the years slipped by. He had originally been urged by his aunt Dorothy, his father's sister, to set down his African experiences — the first among his many travels as an adult. In truth he did once start, but the enterprise ground to a halt when his laptop computer was stolen after 50,000 words had been lovingly entrusted to its memory as Dorothy approached her century — and work was not resumed before she died.

Fairy godmother and periodic financial ambulance, Dorothy had traveled widely herself. As a sixteen-year-old before the First World War she had crossed Canada alone, a feat more remarkable then than it would be today. Undoubtedly the travel bug was sown by her father, a remarkable gentleman who as a sea captain had traveled the world under sail. His constant companion on his voyages was the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which he would read nightly while at sea. He lived well into his nineties and seemingly never forgot a word that he had read.

As a young man in the middle of Queen Victoria's reign, he had purchased a tailored dark suit, but greatly resented the cost. Over the years, as he and his suit aged, he would periodically unstitch it and use the disassembled pieces as patterns to create a new one. Like a sartorial game of Chinese Whispers, with each cutting the pattern would lose some of its precision. Towards the end of his life, as he had shrunken and the tailor's original craftsmanship had become increasingly diluted by constant copying, his clothes took on the appearance of a Salvation Army donation.

Dorothy's father, who had been sailing off the island of Krakatoa when it vanished in a massive volcanic explosion in 1882, was born during the Crimean War and four years old when it ended. So that he would not forget so auspicious occasion, his father had dragged him from his bed and beaten him soundly. The family was staying with Dorothy and her father when the Second World War ended. Having heard his story, Dorothy's niece Jean prevailed upon her grandfather to administer a similar *aide memoire* on her younger brother, Sandy, who fortunately retained no recollection of his nocturnal beating the following morning.

During the First World War Dorothy's father and his vessel had the misfortune to be captured by a German battleship. As captain, he recognised the responsibility he owed to the owners of his vessel in accounting for its loss. He demanded from the commander of his German Nemesis a proper receipt for the ship, setting out the circumstances of its loss. It is a tribute to the code of honor still observed even in wartime by the German warrior caste that such a receipt was formally written and presented. This unique historic document now resides in London's Imperial War Museum — who has somehow managed to misplace it.

Although Dorothy made periodic visits to her sister in what was then Rhodesia, staying at the Leper Hospital founded by her brother-in-law, this hardly counted in her eyes as travel. She continued to live with her father and care for him until the end of his life. Only then, in late middle age, did she resume her real travels.

On one occasion she was returning on leave to England from the school she had started near Ibadan in Nigeria. However, on reaching the coast instead of heading north, as geography might suggest, she turned left instead and headed south down the coast of Africa. She had just started up the Congo River when the Korean War broke out — an event of which she was to remain in ignorance for some months. In time she emerged from the headwaters of the Lualaba, a tributary of the upper Congo. Crossing Lake Tanganyika, she passed into what at that time was still British East

Africa and made her way down the Nile in the hope of finding a steamer to carry her back to England when she reached Alexandria.

There being no ready passage home because all shipping was headed to Korea with supplies for the military, the British consul in Cairo demanded that she wait in her hotel for an indeterminate number of weeks until a berth became available. For someone of her temperament such veritable incarceration was unthinkable and she determined to explore those parts of Cairo not normally covered by Baedeker. It was on one such excursion that she found herself abducted while traveling in a taxi and taken deeper into the slums than planned. It was only when the taxi was forced to pause briefly at a cross-roads that she was able to leap out. Marching furiously through the crowds, clearing a way with her parasol, which she wielded like a saber, she eventually found her way back to the hotel. On hearing of her adventure, the consul promptly found her a passage.

Over the years, as we sat sampling fine vintages together at Alogny and elsewhere, he recounted many other stories of his Aunt Dorothy — an eccentric in the best English tradition. In her late eighties she was still living alone in Crewkerne down in Somerset, but would periodically drive to Oxford to visit her brother and his family. On one such occasion she arrived somewhat later than expected — not an unusual event in itself — and explained that while driving on back roads across Salisbury Plain in her little Morris Minor she had found herself caught up in the noise and turmoil of a full-blown military exercise. Tanks were rolling at high speed in every direction and helicopters swooped low overhead. “What” exclaimed the assembled company in horror, “did you do?” “Oh” she said nonchalantly, tucking her traveling rug around her knees, “I just wound up my window.”

Sandy is the first to admit that his early childhood had been thoroughly conventional — and perhaps by modern standards even a little spoiled. Following the custom of the times in middle-class Oxford society, he was consigned to the care of a nanny. His world was the nursery, the large town garden, in which resided his resident herd of imaginary cows, and the University Parks, to which he would walk daily to feed the ducks.

It was, he recounted, on one of these excursions at the age of four that he and Nanny met an old lady walking her dog, a Dachshund. A recent sojourn at Nanny’s parent’s farm, combined with life within a medical family had imparted a somewhat precocious familiarity with animals and their anatomy. “My” he observed, “what big ‘shudders’ you dog has”, confusing dogs and cows. “Oh no”, he said, on closer inspection. “It’s a penis.” In the immortal words of the old Victorian cartoons in *Punch*, “collapse of stout party.”

This childhood idyll amid North Oxford’s spring blossoms came to an abrupt end early in 1940. As Hitler’s armies marched triumphant across Europe, announcing England as the next objective, the spectre of war was looming ever nearer.

Across the Atlantic, a small group of faculty at Yale University, many with close Oxford connections, set up a committee to offer hospitality to children from Oxford and Cambridge — but one of many similar schemes initiated within the United States.

The invitation reached Oxford early in June, 1940. Parents had to decide rapidly whether the risk of being torpedoed by the numerous U-boats operating in the Atlantic was outweighed by the very real prospect of having one’s children brought up as little Nazis. It was an impossible decision. Once decided, infinitely complex

arrangements had to be made — visas from the US authorities, permission from the treasury to carry money abroad, finding the necessary births and much much more — but within the month 105 children boarded the old Cunard liner *Antonia* in Liverpool, bound for America.

Over the years I was to hear many details of that voyage. How he had attempted to go fishing and early one morning climbed over the fo'ard portside rail in mid Atlantic to check his line. How he had fallen headfirst from an upper bunk onto the steel deck while attempting a move that would foreshadow his later enthusiasm for climbing — both on rock faces and on buildings.

“It was in the galleys of the *SS Antonia*,” he began one day “that one of my cherished childhood beliefs would be shattered — although it was not the first to be undermined and lost. Disillusion had initially come to me when I saw Father Christmas, or Santa Claus, smoking a cigarette in the street. It was not the cigarette that concerned me, but the fact that there were two of him, chatting together.

The cramped cabin provided few opportunities for play,” he continued. “Even the spacious hallway into which it opened was not much better, for it was blocked with massive wooden crates, rumoured to contain gold bullion destined for Fort Knox. Thus I was forced to find my own amusements — whenever I could escape my poor mother’s anxious gaze. It had struck me that the open ocean would be a splendid place for fishing. A ball of string and a bent pin were quickly procured — I don’t recall exactly how, so it couldn’t have been a great challenge. But bait — that was something else!”

So it was that I found myself in the *Antonia*’s spacious galley. Clearly the chef would be the proper person to approach on such a quest. But horror of horrors! Like the multiple Santas, there were at least twenty people in the galley, all wearing the tall hat that I had believed to be the chef’s unique badge of office.

Despite my shattered illusions, I persevered in my mission, and was soon rewarded with a large piece of meat. Of this I am certain, for the rotted remains of it would eventually attract attention and be discovered by my mother many weeks later in my raincoat pocket, packed away with winter clothes in my trunk during the heat of the New England summer.”

But by far his most vivid and lasting memory of that voyage was of standing beside his appointed lifeboat, donned in regulation lifejacket, and watching a torpedo pass harmlessly a few feet under the ship’s stern, while the escorting Royal Navy destroyers dropped depth charges.

Of his wartime sojourn in Connecticut he would recount many tales. It was a rich and generally happy experience, made more immediate and vivid by a remarkable discovery. Following his father’s death shortly before his hundredth birthday, many family papers and heirlooms had come to France. Sandy takes up the tale:

“I was rummaging aimlessly through half-emptied boxes, periodically transported in my imagination back to my childhood home, when I came across an old plastic shopping bag that bore the insignia of a well-known Oxford supermarket. Unpretentious and almost overlooked, it proved to contain a priceless treasure, a magic window into my childhood more graphic, more powerful than anything I could possibly have imagined.

Lovingly preserved by my mother, but long lost in storage after her death, were her own personal mementos of my distracted childhood, now brought to light after remaining hidden for sixty years and more. Letters and pictures, programs and cuttings in confusion. I discovered, for example, that in September 1938, at the age of three, I had played the dual roles of 'Dream Elf and Page' in a dramatic production written and produced by my elder sister Jean and her cousin Daphne. Here was the evidence — a handwritten program for an "Entertainment to be performed at 3:30 pm."

At first I looked no further than the collection of early school reports — reports that reflected painfully little academic merit, but indicated that at least I was gradually participating better in class activities. Nor was I really surprised to learn that at an earlier age, during my first nursery school Band Class, I had "conducted beautifully," sang *London's Burning* ("on and on"!), and played my tambourine "with far more vigour than was necessary"!

However, closer inspection was to reveal something of far greater interest and significance. Jumbled together in disorder, like Tutankamun's treasure, lay a confusion of letters — the complete correspondence that had passed between my mother in England and Grace Bacon, my foster mother in Connecticut. As I rummaged, I would occasionally discover letters that I myself had written — or more accurately that I had dictated, taken down on the typewriter at high speed by Grace Bacon as I galloped on. The improbable circumstances under which the two halves of this correspondence would come to be miraculously united and preserved in one place remain a mystery.

As I dipped casually into the pile, picking up pages at random, I frequently found myself unable to continue reading for the tears that kept welling up unbidden. It became so profound and emotional an experience, peering into the forgotten corners of my past, that I found myself quite unable to continue. Quietly I returned the letters to their resting place, but knowledge of their existence continued to haunt me."

Prompted by the discovery of these wartime letters, which in time he came to prepare for possible publication, he found himself drawn ever more back to his childhood, re-living many events that had remained deeply buried in the accumulating silt of later adventures and mishaps. Amid these echoes from a vanished world, I recall several worthy of repetition. On first arriving in America the family had been invited by their hostess to spend the rest of the summer with her at her vacation home overlooking Squam Lake in New Hampshire.

Some thirty years later, when he had returned to America with his own young family, aged Susan Keith invited them back to Pine Ledge again, although she herself was no longer living there. Arriving long after dark, Sandy soon found a pair of large stone gateposts that he remembered marked the driveway. The front door was unlocked, but no lights were on. The house seemed strangely unfamiliar and did not in the least resemble his memory of it, but long years had passed, it was dark and he was tired. After putting the children to bed he started to explore. There were many books in the house, but none bore the names of either Keith or Bacon, and gradually the suspicion grew that this might not, in fact, be Pine Ledge after all.

It was midnight before he set off through the trees with a small flashlight. Up the road some distance, he soon discovered another pair of stone gateposts. Surreptitiously he crept along the drive, fearful of being identified as an intruder. The house was in darkness, but something distantly familiar about its silhouette in the

moonlight tempted him to try the front door. It too was unlocked. Suddenly, in the feeble beam of the flashlight, past and present fused. He was back!

With considerable anxiety he returned to the sleeping family. Scenes of Goldilocks and the three bears returning to their rumpled beds flashed before him as the children were bundled, half asleep, into the car. The covers were quickly smoothed to conceal their presence and, fearful lest they meet the owners in the drive, they hastily withdrew. As dawn broke the next morning, there was Squam Lake, just as he had remembered it, spread out before them, the magic in no way diluted by the passage of thirty years. He says he often wondered whether the neighbours ever noticed the brief intrusion and puzzled over the identity of their mysterious nocturnal visitors.

Over dinner one evening Sandy admitted that like many small boys, he would often find himself in trouble — more by accident rather than design, for he was, he said, what in Indonesian is called *nakal* — endearingly mischievous and naughty.

“There was one occasion when I feared — nay was sure — that I had inadvertently killed somebody. The journey home from school each day, involved a walk from the bus stop of about a mile. The route followed a tree-lined country road before branching off across wasteland, where I had found my first praying mantis.

I had been to the circus and was very impressed by the man who threw knives and tomahawks at an attractively under-dressed young lady without hitting her. I was not interested in the young lady, but desperately wanted to master the art of throwing a knife with great accuracy.

The trees along the roadside provided admirable targets as I walked home after school, and I was quite pleased with my progress. On most attempts my knife embedded itself blade-foremost in the chosen tree, and week by week my confidence grew. One day the appearance of a car in the distance prompted me to wonder about the parameters involved for hitting a moving target — a purely academic exercise, let me emphasise. Fully intending to hit the nearest tree, I carefully judged the speed of the car and decided that if I wished to hit it, I would throw the knife.....now! My calculation proved to be unfortunately accurate. Unconsciously compensating for the car's speed, I completely missed the target tree, however, and was horrified to see my knife pass through the car's open rear window. I also caught a glimpse of someone sitting in the back seat.

In an instant there was a squeal of tires as the car skidded to an abrupt halt. Even before it stopped moving, I had turned to flee. I was not far from a new, partially-completed freeway — the Wilbur Cross Parkway — beneath which ran a network of drains and tunnels. The closest opening was in part of the system I had not explored, and in my panic I soon became disoriented underground. When I eventually found a way out, it was on the wrong side of a sizable pond quite some distance from home. Anxious for sanctuary, I decided to swim across the pond as dusk fell, and had then to creep back to the house by a circuitous route through the woods to avoid anyone seeing me.

That evening, having changed un-noticed into dry clothes, I listened with particular attention to the radio, expecting at any moment to hear reports of the unprovoked attack — and possible death — of a passing motorist or his passenger. Wracked by guilt and overcome with anxiety, I passed a desperate

week until it became clear that the police were not out in force looking for me. I never did become particularly skilled at knife-throwing and have always resented the loss of my prize throwing knife after that.”

This episode was not, Sandy assured me, the first time that an innocent mistake had had unfortunate repercussions. It was in First Grade at the Foote School in New Haven that his reputation was irredeemably blackened. He had only recently joined the school, a shy, somewhat timid little boy. In the playground one day he discovered a large stone — or was it half a brick? Knowing it shouldn't be there, he promptly disposed of it over the fence and out of harms way. Sadly there was a little girls playing out of sight below and she protested very loudly when hit on the head. It was not, he assured me, a serious wound, but it did require stitches. From that moment on he was dubbed “that horrid little evacuee.”

His reputation, at least among the teachers, took another blow a year or two later when he was discovered up a tree in the playground raining lighted matches onto the ground below. It was, in fact, a lifelike reenactment of the London blitz for the benefit of his assembled classmates. The teacher overseeing recess that day, with a singular lack of understanding, belligerently demanded that he come down immediately to face unspecified retribution. Fearful of what this might involve, he climbed a bit higher into the tree, whence the infuriated teacher attempted to follow. Little boys weigh less than teachers and can climb in safety to slender upper branches. To the unrestrained delight of the onlookers the furious teacher ventured too far into the canopy and fell painfully and with total lack of dignity onto the playground beneath when a branch snapped under his weight. It was fortunate that the head mistress, Win Sturley, understood the motivation, and being a better psychologist than her staff, exacted no punishment other than a stern warning not to repeat the offense.

On another occasion Sandy was reminiscing about his return journey to England shortly before the D-Day invasion in the spring of 1944.

“I was one of about thirty small boys travelling on a new Royal Navy aircraft carrier from New York to the Clydeside port of Greenock. We had been placed in the care of a young officer, who clearly had no understanding of children and how to handle them. With earnest solemnity we were instructed exactly what, and what not, we would be permitted to do; where, and where not, we might go on board. It was made abundantly clear that any transgression would be met with dire retribution.

To a mischievous nine-year-old this was a challenge too good to pass up. There were lamentably few parts of the ship to which we might legitimately go — naturally they were the least interesting. Over the course of the voyage there would be very few compartments on that carrier with which I did not become intimately familiar. In retrospect, it proved excellent training for a later incarnation, when I became a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm during my two years of National Service.

The engine room, where I was made welcome by the stokers and other denizens of the ship's nether world, was naturally a prime destination. To someone already fascinated by mechanical devices, it became a source of endless pleasure and delight.

The greatest prize, however, was to gain access to the hanger deck, an area from which we were quite specifically banned. Terrible punishments were threatened to those who ignored the ban, but the beatings I received never

outweighed the delights to be found there — except once! I had gained entry to a Grumman Avenger in the hangar, and after spending some time in the cockpit, made my way up into the machine gun blister above. Once inside, a small metal flap could be pulled up to form a floor. After about twenty minutes of shooting down imaginary German aircraft it was time to leave. However, I was unable to find the catch that would release the metal flap beneath me. Try as I might, there was no escape, and so I remained trapped in mounting apprehension.

After what seemed an eternity, the hangar deck suddenly sprang to life. To my horror I could see planes being rolled onto the elevator and taken up to the flight deck. This was not a possible consequence of my disobedience that had ever crossed my mind, and was beyond imagination. In due course, my plane too was lifted into the daylight, without anybody noticing my presence. Only when the rightful occupant tried to enter, in preparation for the sortie about to take off, was one very frightened little boy discovered.

The punishment that this episode attracted is one of the few beatings, out of a very considerable total, of which I have specific recollection, for the pain endured for several days in the form of extensive bruising. But there then followed the most wonderful Divine Intervention.

The mess deck where we ate had long tables running athwart ship. The sea was calm and the wooden partitions that divided up the tables in rough weather were not in use. The officer responsible for my discomfort was seated at the head of the table, and I was seated painfully close to him on his right side. Suddenly, without warning, the ship made a violent change of course, heeling over sharply to port. In disbelief I watched as the entire contents of the table started to move, gathering speed as plates, glasses, cutlery and water pitchers swept down to engulf my nemesis. As food and table settings poured into his lap, he overbalanced backwards, to vanish beneath a mountain of wet, gooey debris. In that moment I knew that I had God on my side.”

The crossing had taken almost three weeks when they finally disembarked in Greenock. By the time they boarded the packed train to London, night had fallen, and as there were no vacant seats, they were forced to stand in the corridor. His only memory of that long nocturnal journey was of being surrounded by friendly soldiers and sailors, who plied him constantly with cigarettes, asking all the time about life in America. He is in no doubt that he obliged with a suitably embellished
fantasy.

The long letter from his foster mother, detailing for his mother the normal routines of his life, by some happy stroke of fate would not arrive in Oxford until several weeks had passed. He took full advantage of this opening so happily offered. After arriving home he was put into the bath and thoroughly scrubbed to remove the ingrained dirt of the journey — and the strong smell of tobacco. Clean, indeed polished, he was left in the nursery while his mother went to the kitchen to get supper. When she returned, he was neatly clad in pajamas and dressing gown, riding on the rocking horse — and smoking the cigarette that he swore he always had before retiring.

“My mother was placed,” he continued, “in a difficult situation. Much as she had to exercise some restraint and discipline, she was also very conscious of the need to humour me through this difficult transition, where so much was new and strange. By being too strict, she might risk alienating my

affection. Without the knowledge of my normal routine in America, she was prey to my wildest flights of fancy, at a time when I had but limited regard for the truth.”