



Fig. 1. Mick and Brigid Moran on their wedding day, 1943. Photo courtesy Joe Moran.

## The Death of an Irishman: A Speculative Biography by Joe Moran<sup>ID</sup>

In his essay ‘Inventories and Undoings’, the short-story writer Charles Baxter argues that ‘something in the nature of fiction loves inventories and lists’. One of fiction’s mysterious pleasures, he writes, is how particularized information so readily brings characters to life. Simple, cumulative details – about how they look and sound, their belongings and the objects that surround them, the settings they inhabit – can encapsulate ‘one person’s being-on-earth’. Specificity makes things real. ‘She likes chocolate’ is less persuasive than ‘The only chocolate she will eat is imported from Mozambique.’ A subjective claim such as ‘she is brave’ will eventually have to be substantiated; an invented fact becomes ‘imaginatively true, as long as it doesn’t contradict the logic of the story’. Inventories build a world instantly and irrevocably. ‘If you don’t like amassing this bargeload of material,’ Baxter cautions, ‘you may not be comfortable with fiction itself, or at least realist fiction, which has a tendency to fill up the page with accretive details.’<sup>1</sup>

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Historians are warier of such inventories. J. H. Plumb's dismissal of Lewis Namier as 'lost in a Sargasso sea of detail' comes to mind.<sup>2</sup> It is true that many scholars of microhistory and 'history from below' cast a wide evidential net, accumulating small details from ephemeral sources to build up a composite picture – what Anna Davin calls 'the jigsaw strategy'.<sup>3</sup> Generally, though, the 'so what?' question still has to be asked. What is this information for and how is it being deployed as evidence to support an argument about the past? And yet I must admit that I often feel the urge to suspend this 'so what?' question and fill up the page with details. Details, even when they seem incidental or superfluous, have an adamant exactitude that anchors something (a person, an event, a milieu) in time and space. They can also form an argument in themselves, even if it is just that these things matter and should be noted. The writerly act of singling out a detail from the world's infinite database itself stakes a claim about what is worth noticing. Historians are trained to value an evidenced argument over 'mere' description. But sometimes, as Wallace Stevens put it, 'description is revelation'.<sup>4</sup>

This interest in what Baxter calls 'accretive details' typifies the burgeoning genre of 'speculative biography'. Speculative biographers seek to redress imbalances in the historical record by writing more imaginatively about those with poorly documented, barely remembered lives. Recent examples include Matt Houlbrook's *Prince of Tricksters*, his account of the life of the interwar conman Netley Lucas; Hallie Rubenhold's *The Five*, about the women murdered by Jack the Ripper; Julia Laite's *The Disappearance of Lydia Harvey*, about a young New Zealand woman trafficked into prostitution in Edwardian London; and Anna Funder's *Wifedom*, about George Orwell's first wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy. All combine painstaking research with what Natalie Zemon Davis, in her pioneering work of speculative biography, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, calls 'informed imagination'.<sup>5</sup> They flesh out, extrapolate from and hazard guesses about the extant details, sketching in the wider picture without ever suggesting that it can be painted in its entirety.

Rubenhold's and Laite's books are the most tied to the historical record. They use coroner's inquests, parish registers, birth, marriage and death certificates, rate books, workhouse archives, witness statements, newspaper reports, court records and police case files to reconstruct their subjects' lives and create vivid and immersive worlds for them to dwell in.<sup>6</sup> Houlbrook, despite his equally tenacious work in the archives, concedes that researching a man with thirty-eight aliases is like trying to access 'a specter in the distance, a flicker of light, a will-o'-the-wisp'. He peppers his text with literary devices, such as a fictional scene imagining the playing out of one of Lucas's con tricks, excerpts from the script of a 1950s Australian radio play about Lucas's life, and a love letter to his 'impossible subject'.<sup>7</sup>

Funder has the least to go on. Her most significant source is six letters from Eileen to an old university friend, discovered in 2005. From these, she succeeds in summoning up her subject's unique voice – a mix of empathy, acuity and sly humour. She fictionalizes expansively, surmising Eileen's thoughts and imagining scenes that relatives of Orwell's associates have since questioned,

leading to corrections in subsequent editions.<sup>8</sup> Funder justifies this method as a response to Orwell's biographers, all of them male, who reduce Eileen's contributions to footnotes, hide them behind an anonymizing passive voice, or leave them out altogether. In these 'fictions of omission', Eileen is glimpsed in telling absences, 'like dark matter that can only be apprehended by its effect on the visible world'. Often, all that is left of her are random details, which Funder calls 'scraps of facts, ripped up like a chew toy – a blue eye, the corner of a shoulder blade under a suit jacket'.<sup>9</sup>

As William Pooley argues, the speculative method is more than just about making do, filling in gaps in the record as best one can. It also offers a chance to write history differently, by evoking 'a textured, material, felt past'.<sup>10</sup> This article is my own attempt to write history differently. It focuses on the death of my paternal grandfather five years before I was born. Researching his largely undocumented life and death, I have tried to practise what these speculative biographies have taught me about using the kind of detail more usually deployed in fiction to evoke the gist and essence of a thinking, feeling person moving through the world. Such detail, in the way its particularity eludes classification, feels true to the amorphous mess of a human life, the way it generates unsorted data that cannot be reverse-engineered into narratives of causation and explanation. I have used the present tense for most of what follows because it seemed to fit this sense of an incarnate life propelled by the moods and needs of the moment. I wanted to convey the banal truth that is harder to grasp than a profundity – that this was a real life, too, burning as brightly and fiercely as ours.

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Early Sunday morning, 25 July 1965. A fifty-eight-year-old Irishman, Mick Moran, is in the kitchen of his council flat in Baldwin Street, Smethwick. He looks like many working-class, no-longer-young men of his class and era: short, stocky, beer paunch, chain smoker's skin, hands and face with ground-in soot hidden in creases and folds so that no carbolic can quite remove it. This man is my grandfather.

In 1965 Smethwick is still a town of factories, mostly the small metal-casting factories that have existed in the Black Country since the industrial revolution. From the kitchen window, even on a Sunday morning, Mick can hear the steam hammer from the ironworks a hundred yards away. Usually he would be working now as well: he clocks on every Saturday and three Sunday mornings in the month. This is one of the other Sundays. He is doing what he loves to do on a day off: getting up first thing and pottering round the kitchen, singing at full throttle, heedless of his still sleeping family. As a young man he sang in dance bands around Dublin, and even forty years of chain smoking have not spoiled his fine tenor voice. He is waiting for his wife Bridgid to wake, when she will make him a fry-up which he will eat in leisurely fashion while listening to Kenneth Horne on the radio. Then he will wash, shave and dress carefully in his best suit and shirt (although the suit has worn lapels, and the shirt's collar is frayed and off-white).

Then he will catch the bus to St Pat's on the Dudley Road for eleven o'clock Mass, arriving late as usual.

According to the 1961 census, Mick is one of about 60,000 Irish people in Birmingham, just over five per cent of its population.<sup>11</sup> The Irish influx in the postwar years has led to queues to get into churches on Sunday. These overloaded Birmingham churches are proof, one Irish newspaper reassures its readers, that 'there is no truth in the charge that the Irish "leave their Faith at Holyhead"'.<sup>12</sup> But the queues have led to some resentment among the English Catholic community, and so the Irish tend to stick to their own churches.<sup>13</sup> St Pat's is two miles away, not the nearest church, but unofficially the Irish one.

Brigid, who attends the Saturday vigil to leave Sunday free for housework and cooking the dinner, is the devout one. She is responsible for the picture of the Sacred Heart on the kitchen wall, and the plastic statuette of the Virgin Mary and the mother of pearl rosary on the living room mantelpiece. In parts of Birmingham where the Irish have settled, the newsagents and corner shops sell these items cheaply.<sup>14</sup> Mick, though, is a 'porch Catholic'. Invariably male and usually Irish, the porch Catholic arrives late for Mass and stands in the porch with his fellow latecomers, unfolding a large white hanky stored in his breast pocket to kneel down at the Consecration of the Host. If he is sufficiently late, and lucky, he can miss the sermon. Every porch Catholic knows that attendance at Mass means being there for the Consecration, after which those at the back can sneak out. At around quarter to twelve, Mick will leave and join the queue across the road for the pub, which opens at noon.

Mick and Brigid have been married twenty-two years and have three children: Michael (nineteen), Martin (twelve) and Maria (eight). Brigid would be horrified if she knew that their eldest son (my father) had speculated on the long interval after marriage, by Catholic standards, before he appeared, and the gaps between the siblings. As a good Catholic she would never have practised birth control, but as a porch Catholic Mick must have taken the necessary precautions (it being easy to obtain condoms from Smethwick barbers, who stuck them round the edges of the mirrors).

The flat is a maisonette in a six-storey concrete slab block with deck access, the external walls coated with pebbledash. It is almost indistinguishable from thousands of other industrialized social housing units built for councils by firms like Wimpey and Laing in this period, to rehouse people from slum clearances quickly and cheaply while meeting minimum standards of floor space. From the outside the windows look tiny, and the space allotted for each house barely big enough for a family. Inside, the flat looks like every other one in the block. Off the hallway is a kitchen with linoleum flooring and Formica surfaces, and just enough space to fit a dining table, a living room and a toilet; upstairs are three small bedrooms and a bathroom (no toilet). Every room has a two-bar electric fire, and underfloor electric heating, although the Morans have switched theirs off because it is so expensive. There are worse places to be in the mid-1960s, when just over a fifth of British homes lack a hot water tap.<sup>15</sup>

The Morans are a step up the social ladder from most of the Birmingham Irish. Mick doesn't work in construction like many of those who arrived in the big wave of the 1950s and 1960s, and who queue up in the early morning by the Mermaid pub on Stratford Road in Sparkbrook for the non-unionized, cash-in-hand work known as 'the lump'.<sup>16</sup> Mick was part of the first wave of migration in the late 1930s, as Birmingham boomed in light manufacturing and rearmament industries.<sup>17</sup> Since then he has always worked in factories – the work preferred by the native working-class because it offers stability, better pay and shelter from the weather.<sup>18</sup> For the last dozen years he has been at the Birmid, a huge, seventeen-acre factory with two foundries on Dartmouth Road, about a mile from the flats. It makes most of the alloys and castings for the British motor industry: cylinder blocks, crankshafts, brake drums, gearboxes.

Mick left school at the age of twelve and had no formal training in any field. But he had the kinaesthetic intelligence that could quickly work out how anything pneumatic, hydraulic or electrical worked. So he was soon recruited to the Birmid maintenance crew, who work as a sort of independent aristocracy within the factory. They have a lot of free time, waiting for machinery to break down, and double-paid overtime. Brigid also supplements the family income by cleaning offices in the city centre's new high-rise blocks. By Birmingham Irish standards, they are well-off.

But look around the flat and it tells a different story. The furniture is flimsy and functional: the kitchen has a table and four unmatching chairs (luckily, they never all eat together); the living room has three leatherette armchairs and a sideboard. These items were mostly bought on hire purchase in a second-hand shop on Smethwick High Street, when they arrived here six years ago without a stick of furniture to their name. Until he left for university, one of Michael's chores was to go to this shop each week with a payment book and some coins in an envelope.

On the estate, they are at the bottom of the social pile: bog Irish in an otherwise English working-class enclave. The social separation is reinforced spatially, their flat being on the top two floors at the end of the balcony. This means that, in a poorly insulated block, it freezes in winter and all they can do in the bedrooms is strip off quickly and jump under the damp sheets. Is their bog Irishness why no one talks to Brigid when she uses the block's communal washhouse, and why they have never been invited into anyone else's flat? Perhaps, but the English keep each other at a distance too. The estate houses the 'respectable' elements of the white working class. The husband in the family next door is a toolmaker, the elite of manual workers. The more inward-looking culture of the post-war affluent working class is taking hold here. All the other families in the block have televisions. The aural proof – the theme tune to *Crossroads* or *Coronation Street*, the laughter from sitcoms, the crackling gunfire of Westerns – can be heard drifting up from the flats below each evening.

The Morans have yet to acquire a TV, probably because their life is less domesticated. Brigid goes out every weekday at 5pm to her cleaning job, leaving

Mick's dinner warming on a covered plate on a pan of hot water over the hob. Mick spends a lot of time in the pub, a source of frequent rows with his wife. Much of their married life has been disjointed and interrupted. They met in the Birmingham Blitz, snatching courting time in between air raids. Their honeymoon was a day out by bus to Coventry, picking their way through the bombed-out Cathedral and the cratered roads. After the war they lived in Smethwick, much of its housing flattened by bombs, in 'rooms'; a single bedroom and shared kitchen. They have also spent six years apart, she and the children back in the west of Ireland and he in Smethwick where the work was, returning to Clare for a couple of weeks a year in the summer or at Christmas. Finally, in 1959, he managed to reunite the family here in Baldwin Street.

The pub became a way of life for Mick in the war years and just after. A Mass Observation researcher, travelling on a Birmingham bus in 1948, was surprised to see large groups of men lining the streets of Smethwick and West Bromwich. At first he presumed they were bus queues, 'but upon asking a fellow traveller, inv [interviewer] learned that the people were queueing for the pub to open'.<sup>19</sup> One of them could have been Mick. In his years alone, the pub took on new import as an escape from cramped, squalid lodgings. The habit has survived his reunion with his family. Alcohol is an anaesthetic and thirst-quencher after a day in a hot, dirty job, inhaling foundry dust, and the pub is a place for him to hold court, telling stories and singing songs. He is outside the pub at 5.30pm every work day, and at noon at weekends, waiting for the doors to open.

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Although the Irish are easily the largest migrant population in Britain, they are, in Catherine Dunne's words, 'an unconsidered people'.<sup>20</sup> This substrate of the urban working class is missing, along with other immigrants, from the key text about working-class life of the period, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. In Hoggart's work, as Robert J. C. Young writes, 'the Irish remain another "them", hidden from view, definitely not "us"'.<sup>21</sup> Hoggart lives just a few miles away in the middle-class suburb of Edgbaston, having taken up a chair at the University of Birmingham three years earlier. His Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded in 1964, will largely overlook the culture of the Birmingham Irish during its lifetime.<sup>22</sup>

This lacuna is curious given how visible the Irish are in the city. Irish accents can be heard all over its building sites, its street corners, its pubs and its buses (the Midland Red and Birmingham Bus Corporation having recruited more Irish workers than any other transport department in the UK, many of them women employed as conductors).<sup>23</sup> Irish labourers do much of the work of Herbert Manzoni, the City Engineer, whose grand plan involves transforming Birmingham into a freeway city threaded with tunnels, flyovers and underpasses. The whole city centre has been redeveloped around the Bull Ring Rotunda (a 'gasometer with windows', according to Hoggart) in a way that sees people as 'unavoidable but small elements in the repeated assertings of the city's

massiveness'.<sup>24</sup> Many of the workers manning the diggers, filling the cement mixers and laying the bricks are Irish.

Hoggart's idea of the working class is English and Protestant, and rooted in his upbringing in Hunslet, Leeds in the interwar years. The Leeds Irish mostly settled in the poorer district of Quarry Hill.<sup>25</sup> Much later, in his autobiography, Hoggart did repopulate Hunslet with a small Irish contingent. They congregated, he wrote, in a couple of streets, and had walk-on parts in English working-class lives as 'exotic and at times threatening *dramatis personae*'. They were melodramatically 'other' by dint of being Roman Catholic, with over-large families and a reputation for drinking and fighting. 'We would not have wanted to live like that,' he writes, 'and the thought of one of ours marrying into such a family was fearful; they were like a caste.' One of the children living in these streets became a famous actor with 'an easy lope and a crooked grin which recall generations of Irish charmers' – presumably Peter O'Toole, Hunslet born and raised.<sup>26</sup>

These prejudices died hard. While working at the University of Leicester in the early 1960s, Hoggart encountered terraced houses 'smelling of boiled bacon and cabbage' and full of Irish labourers working on the nearby M1; one of these Irishmen once 'slammed the door in [his] face'. When the Hoggarts moved into their Edgbaston house they discovered that 'the tipsy Irish fitter who installed the central heating had connected the hot with the cold water and vice versa'.<sup>27</sup> If someone as nuanced about social hierarchies as Hoggart could retain these attitudes, we can see what the Morans are up against in 1965, and why Brigid is so mortified when a neighbour complains about her daughter leaving a mess on the balcony. They know that the respectability they have hauled their family into is precarious and provisional.

Mick's first name might double as the disparaging term for an Irishman among Brummies, but his own Irishness is lightly worn. He is not even Irish by birth, having been born in Dublin in 1907, when it was a British city as much as Glasgow or Edinburgh were. Within the Birmingham Irish, a clear divide exists between 'Dubs' and 'culchies', those from Dublin and those from rural Ireland. Often the pubs practise unofficial segregation, with culchies in the public bar and Dubs in the saloon. Dubs view culchies as slow-witted; culchies view Dubs as glib.<sup>28</sup> Mick – loud, confident, garrulous – fits the bill.

In fact, though, he does not care where you are from, the perennial question asked in the city's Irish pubs and dance halls, which really means 'which county are you from?'.<sup>29</sup> He has no interest in the Gaelic football and hurling played all over Birmingham by the diaspora. He rarely ventures into Digbeth, the area southeast of the city centre where they sing Irish folk in the pubs and the newsagents sell two-day-old copies of *The Kerryman* and *The Clare Champion*. He avoids the St Patrick's Day Parade, where people line up behind their county banner. In pubs he has been known to sing Irish rebel songs such as 'The Foggy Dew' and 'Kevin Barry', but only because, ever the performer, he knows they will go down well.

His true musical tastes are American, especially the intimately romantic crooning style his own singing mimics. Hoggart, always suspicious of the Americanization of English culture, calls such crooning 'claustrophobically

personal' and 'the world of the private nightmare'.<sup>30</sup> Mick wears a snap-brim trilby, standard-enough uniform for middle-aged men of that era but also a tribute to his idol, Frank Sinatra, and worn at a tilt like him. Emotionally he is a 'west Brit', to use the pejorative term Irish Republicans reserve for Anglophile Irish Catholics. He acquired his Anglophilia early on, from listening to BBC radio and watching British films in cinemas as a young man in Dublin.

He feels little affinity with the kind of men in Philip Donnellan's documentary, *The Irishmen: An Impression of Exile*, made for the BBC in 1965 but never shown. It explores the lives of casualized Irish labourers in London, building the M1 motorway and the Underground's Victoria Line, who are resentful of the English and homesick for the Ireland they felt forced to leave. Ewan MacColl's song, 'Tunnel Tigers', runs as a leitmotif through the film, counterpoising the beauty of Irish rural rhythms with the soulless slog of navy life.<sup>31</sup> Mick, a committed modern who admires the nonconformist energy and drive of his adoptive city, would find this all much too mawkish. The Irish Republic, with its enfeebled economy and theocratic puritanism, exerts no homeward pull at all.

Sorting through Mick's few papers after his death, my father discovered that, in 1949, he had acquired a British passport. The right to apply for this small, dark-blue booklet, which most of his fellow Irish in Britain would have seen as an instrument of state power and surveillance, came with the Ireland Act of that year, passed in response to the Irish Free State's decision to become a Republic and leave the Commonwealth. Mick had no need of a passport of any kind. The Irish in Britain retained all their social and political privileges under the Act. The Common Travel Area, established in 1923 after the Free State was formed, already allowed free movement between the two nations. Mick never went back to Dublin anyway, and never travelled abroad. Until the rise of package holidays in the 1960s, few native Britons possessed a passport, which was 'a liminal document', required only at borders and not as a general form of identification.<sup>32</sup> And yet Mick had gone to the trouble of writing to the Home Office to declare that he wished to carry on being a British subject, and then filling in the form, having a photograph signed on the back by a person of good standing (probably his parish priest), and paying the admin fee – all so that he could stick this little booklet in a drawer and never use it.

Perhaps he acquired it as some kind of insurance policy in the event of relations between Ireland and the UK taking a turn for the worse. The Ireland Act was, after all, a piece of political legerdemain; the new Republic ceased to be part of His Majesty's Dominions but did not become foreign territory. Perhaps it was Mick's way of deleting memories of being treated like cattle on arrival off the ferry at Holyhead, or of having to sign in at the local police station during the war, when those from neutral Éire were viewed with suspicion. Perhaps it was just an emotional affirmation of identity – and, like all such affirmations, unamenable to rational explanation.

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Around 10.30am, Brigid calls her eldest son, Michael, from his bedroom into the kitchen. Michael is a late-rising student, home from his first year at university. He

has been dozing since eight, woken by his father's singing. He has been working on a building site over the summer, alongside other non-unionized labour, mostly young Irishmen from Clare and Connemara. He is saving up so he can hitchhike to Morocco with a friend. When Michael walks in the kitchen, he sees his father sat on one of the chairs, with the shirt and pants of his suit on, but the shirt unbuttoned. His father is trying to say something but can't speak clearly, and is staring fixedly at his paralysed left hand. Even to a nineteen-year-old medical ignoramus, it is clear he has had a stroke. Michael quickly dresses and runs down to the nearest phone box to call for an ambulance (there is no telephone in the whole block of flats). It takes over two hours to arrive, and another half an hour for Mick to be placed in a wheelchair and bumped down the four flights of stairs to the bottom (there is no lift), by which time the key damage to his brain has almost certainly been done. No one goes with him in the ambulance.

That evening Brigid and Michael visit him in Dudley Road Hospital – opposite St Pat's, where he was headed that morning. He seems much better and has recovered most of his speech. The nurses have given him a jar of buttons which he is supposed, for physiotherapy, to transfer singly into another jar. The visiting goes on for a week. Brigid and Michael take it in turns to go while one of them looks after the two younger children in the flat. Every time one of them visits, he is slowly and dutifully transferring these buttons from one jar to the other. It is strange to see this life force so silently compliant and biddable. One evening, Michael turns up and the bed is empty. The nurses on duty have no idea what has happened. After about half an hour he finds out: his father has suffered a second, catastrophic stroke and, without any of the family being informed, has been moved to the geriatric ward. Here it is obvious, even to Michael's unqualified eyes, that the patients are being held until they die.

Mick cannot sit up unaided and is enclosed in a bed with cot sides. Heavy, strong bedsheets restrict his movements. He seems to have aged about twenty years, and shrunk. No longer able to use his energy and volubility to take up more space in the room than his dimensions merit, he has been reduced to his actual size: five foot three. He can talk only with difficulty, and keeps lapsing into delirium. Then he raves and swears, using the industrial language of the factory floor – something Michael is used to from the building site, but which hugely upsets Brigid. He bangs his hands incessantly against the bars of the bed. Soon he has broken his watch. It is common in geriatric wards at this time to strip patients of all their possessions, even spectacles, dentures and hearing aids.<sup>33</sup> But Mick still has his watch, probably because the nurses are too busy and beleaguered to notice. Michael gives him his own watch, a Christmas present from his parents, and Mick breaks that too.

Michael's summer plans, he knows, are now ruined. There is nothing to do but go each evening to sit mute and dry-eyed by his father's bed for half an hour. Hospitals in the 1960s, especially the geriatric wards, have short and inflexible visiting hours;<sup>34</sup> spouses and relatives are largely seen as a hindrance to the running of the ward and there are just a few, bare wooden chairs for them to sit on. When the half hour is up and Michael or Brigid rises to leave, the same

thing happens: Mick tries to lift himself up as if to get out of the bed to come with them.

Michael has never been inside a hospital before. His knowledge of them comes from the Doctor films with Dirk Bogarde, and from *Carry On Nurse* (1959), in which they are sites for scatological humour about bedpans and sponge baths, and patients are comic foils for the able-bodied medics. In his Morecambe student digs he has seen a few episodes of *Emergency Ward Ten* on his landlady's television. Focusing on the lifesaving heroics of doctors and nurses, it is careful not to depress its viewers too much. The ATV executive Lew Grade allows its writers a maximum of five patient deaths per year.<sup>35</sup> Geriatric wards do not feature.

Dudley Road Hospital is one of the many dated buildings of varied provenance that the National Health Service inherited when it was formed in 1948. Opened in 1889 as the Infirmary of the new Birmingham Workhouse, it still has the Archway of Tears, the Workhouse's former entrance, through which visitors must pass. The geriatric ward, with its stained lino, peeling paint and general air of neglect, has a workhouse feel, a sense that it is a last resort into which the destitute are decanted. Geriatric wards are the most overcrowded and under-resourced part of the NHS. They are often staffed by enrolled nurses, without the professional qualifications of the State-registered nurses. It means that there are effectively two kinds of nursing for two kinds of patient, a residue of the division in pre-NHS days between the voluntary hospitals that took the patients with acute and interesting conditions, and the municipal hospitals, often former poor law infirmaries and workhouses, that took the chronic and incurable cases.<sup>36</sup>

The geriatric ward is silent, apart from the occasional cough. It has an atmosphere that Michael picks up on instantly, made up of two elements: the unavoidable suffering of people nearing the end of their lives, and the avoidable suffering of shame – the shame of dying, of the body failing, of becoming useless and dependent, with nowhere else to go except here, to be cared for under sufferance. Some years after the 1948 National Assistance Act declared the end of the Poor Law, the vast Victorian workhouses are still standing, repurposed as care homes or hospitals like Dudley Road. Along with these poor law facilities survive poor law stigmas about the people forced to use them. Add to this the 'organizational fetishes' and 'discourtesies of silence' that Richard Titmuss of the London School of Economics found in NHS hospitals at this time, which meant that they were often 'run in the interests of those working in and for them, rather than in the interests of patients'.<sup>37</sup> Dudley Road's geriatric ward actualizes these attitudes and turns them into a mood that no one mentions but none can miss.

When the NHS was founded, it had no guidelines for treating older people.<sup>38</sup> Its ethos of modernizing efficiency put cure and convalescence at its heart and deprioritized those deemed incurable or with low life expectancy.<sup>39</sup> As late as 1958, Glasgow teaching hospitals banned the admission of patients over the age of 65.<sup>40</sup> As a field, geriatrics barely existed. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement, began to

formulate her thoughts about how agonizingly lonely it could be to die in a British hospital. She was influenced by her mentor Norman Barrett, a surgeon at St Thomas's Hospital in London who told her that doctors 'desert the dying'. Medics, Saunders wrote in 1964, focused on acute physical pain, both as a diagnostic tool and a target for pain relief. But they ignored the 'total pain' of the gravely ill – the physical pain of dying combined with an enveloping sense of hopelessness and emotional torment.<sup>41</sup> In the medical profession of the mid-1960s, dying meant failure – the failure of death itself, and the failure of medicine to save someone from it.

In a 1962 *Observer* article, 'Living longer than we know how to', the twenty-eight-year-old Jonathan Miller, trained as a doctor but now best known for appearing in *Beyond the Fringe*, wrote blithely about the lamentable fact of people living too long. Advances in immunology, antibiotics and surgery over the last half century had, he wrote, 'filled in the most spectacular water-jumps of the human racecourse, allowing a bigger field into the home stretch'. All it took was a rough winter or a few days of smog to fill the city hospitals with a 'frail and fractious community' of old people. The doctors mostly left the harassed nurses to administer to 'this human flotsam ... suffering the rewards of longevity'.<sup>42</sup>

Euthanasia was widely debated in newspaper articles, letters pages and television and radio broadcasts in the 1960s, in part because irregular pain relief and symptom management meant that many died in excruciating pain.<sup>43</sup> In 1969 the novelist Simon Raven, comic chronicler of upper-middle-class English life, wrote in the *Spectator* in praise of euthanasia. 'Human vegetables are obscene and the "life" in them should not be preserved,' he declared, after a brief stay in hospital had brought him into contact with patients at the end of their lives. Britain was turning itself into 'a spinster daughter, neglecting its proper business and pleasure in order to take care of Mother ... i.e. of the mass of human detritus which ought to be dead and buried'.<sup>44</sup> The National Health Service was then a young institution, without the totemic status it would acquire in the public imagination.<sup>45</sup> Universal care – equal access to free treatment on the basis of need – was a newish and not yet sacralized ideal. Raven resented the millions spent 'shoring up bodily and mental failure' in 'an already over-crowded and over-complicated country'.<sup>46</sup>

Raven's novels rehearsed at greater length his opposition to what he saw as egalitarian dogma and the coercive democratization of society. For him, the artificial prolonging of life was part of a more general state interference into life's natural inequalities. His 'robust pagan philosophy' saw life as short and brutal, and valued individual pleasure and independence over compassion and social responsibility.<sup>47</sup> This performatively blunt and worldly reckoning with economic and biological necessities hid darker attitudes – towards those who suffered those necessities earlier and more brutally and who could be dismissed, in a brief coda to a sentence, as human trash. In his principled contempt for social equality, Raven at least revealed a truth that no modern democracy, based on equal rights and social welfare, will admit: some lives

are worth more than others. The dying, like the masses in Raymond Williams's famous formulation, are always other people.<sup>48</sup>

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Mick and his eldest son have a difficult relationship. Unlike most men of his generation, he is demonstratively affectionate, with no inhibitions about hugging and kissing his wife and younger children. But he also has a volcanic temper, especially when emboldened by drink, and his eldest son bears the brunt of it. Since his mid-teens Michael has been slightly taller than his father, and prepared to fight back. The fist fights in their cramped kitchen are short-lived and desultory, leaving no physical damage but a bitter aftertaste.

They view each other across a generational abyss. Mick was thirty-nine when he had his eldest child, and in 1965, when the first baby boomers are coming of age, fifty-eight feels old. At university, Michael has renamed himself Mick, in honour not of his father, or his Irish heritage, but Mick Jagger. His political education has mirrored that of many left-leaning baby boomers. At fifteen he began selling *Challenge*, the Young Communist League's newspaper, outside Smethwick Library every Saturday morning. Then, when the building of the Berlin Wall brought disillusionment, he joined the Labour Party and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Mick, meanwhile, feels at home with Birmingham's Chamberlainite tradition of working-class Conservatism. In its own way, his peripatetic life is a demonstration of the virtues of enterprise and application. He was a child and adolescent growing up in the centre of Dublin in the middle of the Easter Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War, a terrifying experience which has made him wary of all forms of social unrest. He views with alarm his eldest son's standard-issue experiments with left-wing activism. He may also fear, with more justification, that his son is leaving him behind socially. Michael's CND meetings take place just off Lightwoods Park, the poshest part of Smethwick, in large terraced houses with kitchen-diners and knocked-through living rooms lined with bookcases.

The arguments between father and son coalesce around race. Mick is a casual, unvociferous racist typical of his generation; Michael is a casual anti-racist with little knowledge of other races and cultures, also typical of a left-wing English student in the 1960s. This would not matter were Smethwick, which adjoins Birmingham but has never formally been part of it, not such a seedbed of racial resentment. Since Mick returned there alone in 1953, it has been changing: first with the arrival of West Indians and then, later in the decade, Punjabi Sikhs. In fact, the Birmid factory has been recruiting from the Punjab since the war; in the late 1950s these workers were joined by men from the Mirpur district of Kashmir, and in the early 1960s by men from Sylhet in East Bengal. Asians now form the bulk of its workforce.<sup>49</sup> In an era of almost full employment, this causes no great tensions, even if the races barely mix in the factory and Asians never reach supervisor level. Mick's elite maintenance crew is all white.

The real conflicts revolve around housing. Smethwick's housing stock is decrepit and cannot accommodate the number who need to be rehoused from the slums, never mind those from the Punjab and elsewhere. 'The Indians and Pakistanis travel by jet to Smethwick, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries', as an article in the *Economist* puts it. The Labour majority on Warley council has promised 'maisonettes for all' but there are nowhere near enough flats being built to meet demand.<sup>50</sup>

In July 1961, the maisonette blocks in Price Street, adjacent to the Baldwin Street flats and completed at the same time, made the national news. Sardar Mohammed, a twenty-eight-year-old Pakistani foundry moulder, his wife Razina and their three children had been offered a flat.<sup>51</sup> Ninety-six families in Price Street withheld their rent in protest. Apart from the standard objections to Asian neighbours – that they were unclean, spread disease and looked at you strangely – the strikers objected that they had spent years on council waiting lists while sharing rooms with their children. 'We waited years in rooms to get a decent place to live and *nobody's* going to turn it into another slum,' one said.<sup>52</sup>

The council estates were, in fact, overwhelmingly white. The Sardars were the first Asian family to be rehoused by the council, and only because they had lived in the town for ten years and were the owner-occupiers of a house scheduled for demolition. The only other Asian family rehoused since then, in 1964, had also relocated from a demolished house, by which time the Sardars had left the area.<sup>53</sup> Normally it required long residence to make a family eligible for a council flat – or, in the Morans' case, the fraudulent pretence of long residence. Mick had turned up in 1953 at the housing offices, not telling them that his family was in Ireland, and got them reinstated on the waiting list. There was no question, after their own years of separation and hardship, of the Morans joining the strike. Brigid made neurotically sure that she had the exact £3 7s 6d ready for the council rent collector when he called each Friday evening. In any case, the strike soon collapsed after the strikers were threatened with eviction.

By 1964, the battles had moved on to the streets of small terraced houses on the other side of Victoria Park, where the aspirant white working class hoped to move up to owner occupation. Here they found themselves competing with Asians in the property market. Those already in situ now had new Asian neighbours, often living crowdedly with extended families. The white residents claimed that, to buy these houses, Asians produced large sums in cash from suitcases, the saved-up wages of several people from the same family or the same village.<sup>54</sup>

Like most Irish immigrants at the time, Mick did not aspire to homeownership. Like many immigrants, though, he was apprehensive about the next generation of incomers. As the 1964 general election approached, he declared that he would be voting for the Tory candidate, Peter Griffiths, who was calling for strict immigration controls and many of whose supporters were openly racist. Meanwhile, Michael was often the only canvasser pounding Smethwick's

streets with the Labour candidate, Patrick Gordon Walker. Gordon Walker was a former Christ Church don who lived in Hampstead Garden Suburb and treated the Smethwick seat as his natural entitlement. Michael attended excruciating meetings in private houses where specially selected voters put out their best china for the great man, who had no idea how to talk to them.

The campaign was the cause of more fights with his father, but also disillusioning. He was beginning to realize that it was not enough to win an argument with the unenlightened, that fears and prejudices grow out of the unequal and chaotic rationing of scarce resources. He could see that these unfairnesses were felt especially starkly in Smethwick, which had generated so much of the nation's wealth while sharing so little of it with those who had to live there. Such problems were too intractable for the Patrick Gordon Walkers of this world to solve.

Father and son have now spent almost a year apart and the dust has settled on their arguments. Mick is proud that his son has gone to university – a rare enough event here in 1964 to inspire an article in the *Smethwick Telephone* – and they have exchanged a few friendly letters while Michael has been away. Michael is emerging from adolescent superciliousness and beginning to learn how to talk to his father. Mick's stroke has come at just the wrong time.

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The visits to the geriatric ward continue. As the summer drags on, Michael goes less, and Brigid goes more. This sight – a wife sitting at the bedside of her dying husband – is a common one in hospitals across the country. For the last thousand years or so women have lived longer than men, and the gap is widening. Life expectancy at birth in 1965 is 68.1 years for a boy, and 74.2 for a girl.<sup>55</sup> By now, the indiscriminately contagious deadly diseases – smallpox, cholera, scarlet fever, tuberculosis – have either been eradicated or lost much of their lethal power. The commonest killer, especially among men, is arteriosclerosis, known colloquially as 'hardening of the arteries' and the main cause of strokes and heart attacks.

Both senses of the word *stroke* – to touch lightly or graze, and a sharp blow – convey something of a stroke's silent, devastating deadliness. Guy Wint, a former diplomat and specialist on the Far East, suffered a severe stroke in 1960 from which he partially recovered, enough to be able to dictate his 1965 book, *The Third Killer*, to an amanuensis. Strokes, he wrote, carry suggestions of dark magic, of being 'touched by an unseen power'. Like Job, the stroke victim is 'the punished of Heaven, and ordinary people draw in their skirts at his passing'.<sup>56</sup> In the mid-1960s, doctors hate treating stroke patients because there is no recognized treatment and they linger on wards, blocking beds.<sup>57</sup> The clinical advice essentially amounts to confining stroke patients to bed to avoid another stroke.<sup>58</sup> There are no consultants specializing in strokes; neurology is barely even a discipline yet. Like pneumonia, strokes are thought to be 'the last pathway toward death'.<sup>59</sup>

A stroke's sudden and unforeseen onset may be its most terrifying quality, but its origins lie in the slow and invisible clogging of arteries over many years. Brigid is a mediocre cook and, since their arrival in England, has fed Mick stodgy, comforting carbohydrates: chops and chips, Irish stew, shepherd's pie, bacon and boiled cabbage. Like most men of his class and generation, he has a huge appetite for tobacco and beer, and has done no exercise, other than work and cycling to work, all his adult life. He has this much in common with the working-class English men sketched in *The Uses of Literacy*: he is a 'cheerful existentialist' who does not believe in doctors, and thinks that 'tomorrow will take care of itself'.<sup>60</sup>

The actuaries of insurance companies, who gamble on average life expectancies when calculating premiums, know the starkly numerical score. In December 1965, a scholarly paper for the Institute of Actuaries reported on an eighteen-year study by the Prudential Assurance Company. It concluded that the two biggest risk factors, based on the 'mortality experience' of policyholders, were hypertension and obesity.<sup>61</sup> The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company calculated that, for a man of forty-five, an increase of twenty-five pounds above standard weight reduced his life expectancy by twenty-five per cent, so he was likely to die at sixty when he might otherwise have lived to eighty.<sup>62</sup> These bare facts are what bring so many men into geriatric wards after strokes and heart attacks, while their healthier wives sit by their beds on hard wooden chairs.

Strokes, as Guy Wint pointed out, are 'not clean killers; they do their gruesome work on those whom they maul but let go'. The stroke victim's body, he wrote, is never free from pain. Far from vegetating, it feels charged, the barest touch or contact with it like an electric shock. The victim may have a clear head but be wholly unable to express these thoughts to others, including doctors, who are disinclined to listen anyway. To the severe stroke victim, Wint wrote, 'memory is the principal activity with which he is left'. They spend their days in waking reminiscence – usually disjointed vignettes of distant events, since a stroke accelerates the tendency for older memories to be sharper than more recent ones as we age.<sup>63</sup> If Mick's experience is similar to Guy Wint's, he will feel fully alive, his thoughts forming lucidly in his head without an outlet, this once unstopably talkative man reduced to silence or unintelligibility.

The brain, it is starting to be understood by the mid-1960s, is tantamount to the living self: the moment of death is not when the heart stops beating but when the brain dies through lack of oxygen. The brain is the most active part of the body, asleep or awake, and is hungrier for oxygen and glucose than any other organ. That is why a stroke wreaks such havoc; if a blockage or haemorrhage deprives any part of the brain of blood for more than a few minutes, it will die. The brain drives every human action in the world, using millions of cells to formulate intentions and deliver commands to the muscles which put them into practice. It is also home to the vast, unmapped areas of human life that leave no evidential trace: unspoken thoughts, fleeting mental images, memories, dreams, daydreams. If historical change is, on the basic atomic level, the redistribution of the finite

energy of the universe, then these things too are part of history. An unvoiced thought uses energy, just as a public utterance or action does. Human history is the history of billions of brains, each one busily processing its own unique, coordinated hallucination of reality. To try and guess what is going on inside the brain of a stroke victim with no way of articulating that hallucination is to confront the unknowability of others, and the impossibility of the historian's task in retrieving the truth about a life.

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What memories pass through Mick's brain while the National Health Service waits for him to die so his bed can be refilled? Here 'informed imagination' must take over. At some point, I assume, he casts his mind back to the happiest part of his married life, the couple of years they spent in rural North Yorkshire. In 1950 they had both got jobs at St Martin's Catholic Preparatory School in Nawton, a village twenty-five miles north of York, Mick as caretaker and odd job man, and Brigid as a kitchen worker. Most likely they heard of the jobs through an advertisement in one of the Catholic papers sold at the back of church. St Martin's was a feeder school for Ampleforth, a leading Catholic boarding school, and its pupils were the sons of prosperous Yorkshire Catholics. The school had recently moved into Kirkdale Manor, a neo-Georgian mansion with six acres of grounds, including tennis courts and a swimming pool that Mick and Brigid were allowed to use outside of termtime. The school paid badly, but it paid two wages. After the factory grind, Mick's work was fairly light, and it suited his knack for picking up skills, from fixing guttering to mending rugby posts. It also provided an unimaginable luxury, a house in the grounds – a triumphant escape from 'rooms'.

My father recalled an outing the three of them made to Scarborough in a black Triumph Mayflower, in the summer of 1951. How did Mick get hold of such a high-end car? Most likely he borrowed it from one of the teachers at the school. When did he pass his driving test? Almost certainly never; he would have given the car a run around the grounds, quickly mastered the basics (he knew how a car's parts worked; how hard could it be to drive one?), and motored away, laughing off his wife's pleas to drive more carefully. In this imagined scene, I see a banally bickering married couple and their young son on a day out – a rare interval of normal family life.

Presumably, less happy memories enter his head too. I have another mental image from early 1953, a memory of my father's. Mick is leaving their house on the edge of Kilrush in west Clare, wearing a black beret and a belted gabardine trench coat (a nod to one of his screen heroes, Humphrey Bogart) and carrying a cardboard suitcase. He is catching the bus to Limerick, from where a train will take him to Dublin for the crossing to Holyhead. A year earlier, they had made the calamitous decision to move back to where Brigid is from. They live in a cold, damp hovel laughingly called 'Cosy Cottage', with flagged floors, thatch that leaks brown rain, no electricity or plumbing, and water fetched from a barrel. It is testimony to the hopeless state of the Irish economy in the 1950s that Mick –

hardworking, persistent and able to turn his hand to anything – can find no work of any kind. Brigid is pregnant again, and the decision to split the family has been made as soon as they know they have an extra mouth to feed. He sends a postal order for £5, half his salary, from Smethwick to Kilrush every week. He misses the birth of his second son that November: Michael has to walk the two miles to the hospital with his mother, carrying her things in a case, after her waters break at the hovel.

The reasons for their return remain hazy. Brigid was certainly homesick for west Clare, but there is also a suggestion that they left Yorkshire under a cloud. Depressed after two miscarriages, she had filled the salt cellars used for school dinners with sugar. Could her upset at the scolding she received have been the final straw, and their lives have turned on it? In his biography of Monica Jones, John Sutherland points to the strange mix of ‘power and powerlessness’ one feels when researching a life. ‘One feels like an impotent god,’ he writes. ‘One aches to intervene: but can’t. You are powerless even to warn, like some Shakespearean ghost or soothsayer.’<sup>64</sup>

If they had stayed in Yorkshire, Mick would have eaten better, drunk less, got more exercise, and been relieved of the stress of looking for work and accommodation alone and then trying to bring his family together again. My father believed that leaving Yorkshire for Ireland cost his father at least ten more years of life. Patrick Joyce writes of the early death of his own father in 1963 at the age of fifty-five, blaming it on a hard life as an itinerant labourer and years going back and forth from Ireland to London. The early death of fathers was, he writes, ‘an experience shared with many of my generation of Irish immigrants’ children. These were the men that truly “died for Ireland”, men forgotten, worn down by hardship and neglect – not least the neglect of the young state they had left and which was usually only too glad to see the back of them.’<sup>65</sup>

I have another image of Mick in my head, starting his life all over again, aged forty-six, in Birmingham lodging houses. He sleeps in a room with five other men, under a stained quilt and on thin pillows soiled with sweat and hair oil, kept awake by others’ snoring, farting and retching in the night or stumbling in and out of bed to work night shifts.<sup>66</sup> But this *mise-en-scène* of lodging-room squalor is actually taken from *Apple in the Treetop*, a fictionalized memoir by the Irish writer Richard Power, who lived and worked as a migrant labourer in Birmingham in the mid-1950s. When I first read this scene years ago, it felt so convincingly grim that my brain couldn’t help placing my grandfather inside it. Fiction writers know how seductive the arbitrary detail can be. Just as a pillow stained with hair oil can bestow on a fictional character the random specificity of a real person, so too can it breathe verisimilitude into a poorly evidenced life. All I know is that Mick stayed in lodging houses for a time, and then the box bedrooms of small terraced houses with landladies of varying degrees of amenability.

The critic James Wood writes that ‘in life as in literature, we navigate via the stars of detail. We use detail to focus, to fix an impression, to recall. We snag on

it.’ Details give us a purchase on the world. Wood calls this quality ‘thisness’, after the medieval theologian Duns Scotus and the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Thisness, he writes, is ‘any detail that draws abstraction towards itself and seems to kill that abstraction with a puff of palpability, any detail that centres our attention with its concretion’.<sup>67</sup> Thisness sticks in the mind and comes to seem indisputable. These details of my grandfather’s life have become so entrenched in my brain that they might as well be first-hand accounts, or even memories of my own. That is, after all, how memory works, by the strengthening of synaptic connections through repeated use. Memories are laid down as physical paths in the brain, routes from neuron to neuron called engrams. The more often memories are recalled, the more these electro-chemical pathways are consolidated. Even unreliable recollections thus seem more reliable the more we remember them. When we die, these pathways, memory traces conserved in living tissue, are destroyed.

At the end of September, Michael goes back to university in Lancaster, guilty and relieved to be free of hospital visits. In the third week of October, a three-word telegram arrives at his Morecambe digs: ‘Dad died. Mum.’ He catches the train home and, as the grown-up son, dutifully deals with the admin. He registers the death the next day. *Male, 60 years*, the death certificate says. *Cause of death: 1a Cerebral Thrombosis* (1a being the immediate cause of death, as opposed to 1b, underlying causes). The doctor certifying the death has an Indian surname. Mick’s occupation, presumably at his son’s behest, is ‘electrician’. These, above all the details I can find of my grandfather’s life, should be irrefutable. A death certificate is the legal proof that a living, breathing, warm-blooded human existed and no longer exists. Without one, no funeral can take place. But Mick’s death certificate ages him by two years; my father must have been vague about his father’s date of birth then. Nor was he an electrician, at least not a trained one. Perhaps my father chose that description as a residue of the class anxieties that led his parents to tell him, when he started school in Smethwick aged 13, to tell anyone who asked that his father was an ‘electrical engineer’.

On the same day, Michael reads in the newspaper about the Beatles collecting their MBEs, and about the bomb that has exploded at the house of the Smethwick MP Peter Griffiths, put through the letter box while he and his wife were out. They are still searching for children’s bodies on Saddleworth Moor on the outskirts of Manchester, after Ian Brady and Myra Hindley’s arrest a few weeks earlier. Michael has that sense that the just-bereaved often have, of the surreal haphazardness of details impinging from the public world, all of them declaring how oblivious the rest of the world is to one’s distress. The radio in the Baldwin Street flat is piped in from Radio Rentals, with pre-set buttons that limit listening to a few stations. In the Moran household it is always set to the Light Programme. That week, the radio is permanently on in the flat and Michael keeps hearing Ken Dodd’s ‘Tears’, now in its fifth week at the top of the charts. It is an old Rudy Vallée song from the dance-band crooner era – too saccharine even for his father. Michael would never care for such a song anyway, but he will hate this one for the rest of his life.

Here is one more random detail from that time: at Mick's funeral, as the coffin is lowered into the grave, a small group of men whom the family have never seen before line up about twenty yards away and bow their heads. At the end, one of them comes up to Brigid and says something. They are the Birmid maintenance crew that Mick has worked with for most of the years he has been back in England.

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In another essay, 'Things About to Disappear: The Writer as Curator', Charles Baxter discusses the writer's crucial role in noticing and recording phenomena in elaborate detail before they vanish. In an age when our attention homes in on the new and vogueish, he suggests, remembering these 'things about to disappear' (the phrase comes from Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*) is a subversive act.<sup>68</sup> Human attention is finite and uneven. There is always too much of the world to notice, too much of the present to filter as it recedes into the past. The scarcity of our attentional resources means that we focus unduly on the novel, the emergent, the things making the most noise.

This cognitive bias also infects the historical imagination. Christopher Bray's book on the year 1965 in the UK, for instance, sees it as 'the hinge year' in the 'long sixties' (1956–73) and 'the year when everything changed ... the year the old Britain died and the new Britain was born'. 1965, he writes, 'planted bomb after bomb under the hidebound, stick-in-the-mud, living-on-past-glories Britain that preceded it – and gave us the country we live in today'.<sup>69</sup> Bray's account of that year is metropolitan and youth-focused, centring on popular culture, fashion, new technology, and the first stirrings of feminism and the counterculture. Dominic Sandbrook sees 1965 as pivotal for different reasons, it being the year 'Britain was wrecked' by elitist progressives such as Roy Jenkins and Anthony Crosland, who dragged the country 'kicking and screaming into a brave new world of modernisation – whether people liked it or not'. In the process, 'old communities have been uprooted, old courtesies have been sacrificed and old traditions have been destroyed'.<sup>70</sup>

By such cherry-picking of evidence does history become, in the words of *1066 and All That*, 'the cause of nowadays'.<sup>71</sup> Lost in such accounts, with their rush to judge social change through the preoccupations of the present, is the recalcitrance of detail. Details reveal stubbornly knotty, singular lives, which refuse to volunteer themselves in aid of facilely persuasive narratives of progress or decline. They urge humility on any historian trying to pick through the sheer miscellaneity of life, and the unreachable otherness of other people, in search of pattern. They show individual lives, like Mick Moran's, intricately meshing with other lives in time and space, colliding chaotically with wider social histories, illuminating and concretizing the story of emigration, race, religion, housing, work and public health in these years. But they also show that such lives have an infinite granularity that evades attempts to generalize and categorize. In this world of ungovernable detail, Mick Moran is someone who sings Irish rebel songs in pubs, but then applies for a British passport on the quiet. You

wouldn't want to mess with him after he's had a few pints, but he can launch unbidden into 'If I Loved You' from *Carousel* and move you to tears. He can do all the traditionally masculine DIY jobs, but is also a dab hand with a Jones electric sewing machine, running up clothes for his children from any material he can get his hands on. He is, like everyone else, unfathomable, even to himself.

James Wood argues that modern fiction relies heavily on this scattergun approach to detail. From Flaubert onwards, it is filled with seemingly gratuitous details that refuse to explain themselves. A wealth of what Wood calls 'off-duty detail' now seems to the modern reader like a prerequisite for any text claiming to realism – because life also contains 'a certain superfluity, a built-in redundancy'. Setting down details is a way of focusing the attention. Life is mind-bogglingly full of disparate and unresolvable detail, and rarely directs us towards it, Wood argues. But writing teaches us to notice details we might otherwise overlook.<sup>72</sup> Details in writing are intrinsically democratic; by drawing the reader's eye, they affirm that the life attached to those details is worthy of our attention. They make the most inconspicuous person seem compellingly unique.

Bray and Sandbrook use the same event to symbolize the old world dying in 1965: the death of another stroke victim, Winston Churchill, in January of that year.<sup>73</sup> Yet Churchill nearly died, of another massive stroke, in 1953. If he had, would the old world have died then instead? No one thinks to tell the story of 1965 through fifty-eight-year-old Irish foundry workers dying of generationally common conditions in unglamorous West Midlands towns. But that year belongs not just to the young, or the revered dead like Churchill, for whom 300,000 people queued up in the bitter midwinter for three days and nights to walk past his coffin as it lay in state in Westminster Hall. It belongs too to these last Victorians and Edwardians, dying without fanfare in geriatric wards. Judith Butler uses the word 'grievability' to account for this phenomenon of certain deaths being more noticed than others. 'If a life is not grievable,' Butler writes, 'it is not quite a life.'<sup>74</sup> In these differing levels of grievability, we discover what kinds of people a society values and who it would prefer not to notice.

One might even read Mick Moran's death as others have read Churchill's, as the extinguishing breath of a dying world. After he died, the Irish presence in Birmingham became less visible. Immigration from Ireland was already tailing off by the mid-1960s and there were few new arrivals by the early 1970s, by which time the city's economy was in decline.<sup>75</sup> After the 1974 IRA pub bombings, Catholic churches, schools and businesses in the city were damaged by petrol bombs; the Irish were refused service in shops and ignored by their English co-workers. They learned to be more circumspect. The St Patrick's Day Parade went on an indefinite hiatus, only revived during the global Celtic revival of the 1990s.<sup>76</sup> Had Mick been alive, this would have confirmed what he always knew: the English acceptance of the Irish was grudging and contingent.

Like the motor industry it served, the Birmid became, from the late 1960s onwards, a symbol of industrial unrest, managerial failure and national decline. The Commission for Industrial Relations recorded a hundred disputes at the

Birmid in 1969 alone, most of them wildcat strikes.<sup>77</sup> Dependent for much of its business on that troubled behemoth, British Leyland, the firm suffered mass layoffs in the 1970s.<sup>78</sup> In 1982 the Dartmouth Road site was shut and its two foundries demolished. The medium-rise blocks at Baldwin Street and Price Street, once home to the ‘respectable’ working classes, suffered another, familiar story of estate neglect, poor maintenance and vandalism, summarized in that housing-office euphemism ‘hard to let’. They were demolished in 1988 after the site was sold off to a developer.<sup>79</sup> Google Street View now shows Baldwin Street filled with the generic redbrick low-build private houses typically built to replace dynamited council blocks.

Things about to disappear go unnoticed. The last St Patrick’s Day Parade, the last family to leave a condemned slab block, the closure and demolition of a foundry that once dominated its town’s skyline; all these went unrecorded, as far as I can discover, even in the local press. And so, just over two decades after Mick Moran’s death, the waters closed over the settings of his life. In 1996, when I got my first academic job, I was surprised to find that I had to declare my grandparents’ medical history on a form. What did the death of this man before I was born have to do with me? I had no idea even how he had died. I rang my father and heard the first, truncated version of the story I have just told.

No one in my family is a great hoarder of materials, and they have lived mostly in smallish houses without garage or loft space for evidence to amass. Apart from his death certificate with the wrong age on, the only physical evidence I have of my grandfather’s life is his wedding photograph (figure 1). This too feels unreliable. While my grandmother is beaming, which I never saw her do in real life, he looks rather saturnine, which by every account he never was. They look the same height, when I know that he was three inches taller than her; she must have been wearing very high heels. There is nothing else: no record of his supposedly fine singing voice, nor the cadences and timbre of his speech, nor the small specifics of appearance that a photograph would never pick up, nor the inimitable way he took up space in the world, through physical bulk, gait, stride, posture and gestural tics. No trace either of his British passport or the letters he wrote to his eldest son after he left home, written in a formally correct and sophisticated English that my father said was easily the equal of the undergraduates he later taught.

The problem with writing history, as opposed to fiction, is that in the absence of evidence one cannot simply make up details, and thus render something true. *True* is not just an adjective but a verb, meaning to prove or to make something true. As a self-taught engineer, my grandfather would have been familiar with the term *trueing up*: making an object just straight or level enough to fit its purpose. *We still have to true up the end face on that cylinder block*, he might have said to another member of the maintenance crew. Historians understandably balk at the notion that they are making things true; it sounds uncomfortably close to making things up. The apparatus of footnotes reassures both author and reader that all

evidence can be traced to some other source, and ultimately to some graspable, recapturable world. Unlike fiction, history offers, in Carolyn Steedman's words, 'the fantasy that *it may be found*'.<sup>80</sup>

And yet some trueing up happens in all history writing. How could it not, when in most cases the available evidence is both chaotically incomplete and too capacious to be harvested by a scholar with finite time and energies? That evidence also derives from the unreliable memories of fallible human brains, capable of endless self-delusions, repressions, embellishments and misconstruals. Any historian of their own family becomes acutely aware of the malleability of memory, the way the same event supports radically different but wholly sincere retellings by its different members. I know that this account of my grandfather's life has trueed up at times – made something true by making it look true, by building up contiguous or cognate details around him to paint a picture that seemed to fit with the evidence I could more conventionally corroborate.

Here is one of many details I could not true up. In the summer of 1953, Frank Sinatra played the Birmingham Hippodrome as part of his British tour. The theatre was only a quarter full. Sinatra's career was on the slide, before *From Here to Eternity* revived it later that year. When he came on stage, he asked everyone to come to the front.<sup>81</sup> I imagine Mick in that audience in the circle, thrillingly upgraded to the stalls and watching Sinatra, singing 'September Song' and 'Sweet Embraceable You' with perfect phrasing and breath control, from just a few feet away. I would love to have placed him in that auditorium. It would have encapsulated what I imagine he loved about Sinatra: that mix of melancholia and swagger that made his own loneliness palatable, a few months after returning to England on his own. I think it highly likely he was there, in the cheap seats, based on how much he loved Sinatra and the ticket price he could afford. But I cannot be sure. The speculative biographer's dilemma is that the facts are missing but the story feels incomplete without them. Sometimes it is better to admit the unsolvability of the past than to coat methodology with a veneer of verifiability.

Here is a detail about him I *have* managed to true up, because it requires not his presence but his absence. On 25 July 1965, the Midland Red bus to St Pat's from the top of Baldwin Street at 10.50am runs with one less passenger than normal. There is no diminutive Dubliner waving the bus down at the stop, boarding at the open platform at the back and tottering along the aisle as the bus rocks, relying on his low centre of gravity, while joshing with the Irish woman conductor and the other passengers. Mick Moran isn't there because he has stepped unnoticed out of this world of the living into the hidden world of the dying and the dead. 'Not knowing who the dead were,' Elizabeth Bowen writes in her novel *The Heat of the Day*, 'you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the news vendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the homegoing

rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger.’ The unknown dead reproach those left living by ‘their unknownness, which could not be mended now’.<sup>82</sup> To be forgotten is to die twice, as the saying goes. I wanted to narrate my grandfather’s death as a way of mending his unknownness, of reversing the sentence of *damnatio memoriae*, erasure from the historical record, that is passed on people like him, as though they had never lived.

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Watching his father die left my father with a lifelong fear of hospitals. He barely troubled the National Health Service until fifty-three years later, when he spent thirty-six hours in an intensive cardiac unit at Wythenshawe Hospital. I recall the doctor’s little sigh before the words, ‘I don’t think he’s going to make it.’ It sounded well-rehearsed. Medics now undergo clinical empathy training, with actors playing the role of patients or their relatives and marking them on their performance. An important part of the training is learning to deliver bad news. Something trained and assessed inevitably inclines to the blandly satisficing; doctors can hardly be expected to be sincerely distraught over what to them is a daily event. Still, I prickled at the fact that he was clearly following a script.

My father would have gently reproved me. Try being in a geriatric ward in Smethwick in 1965, he would have said. The modern hospice and palliative care movement had done much in the intervening years to affirm the right to die well and with dignity, or at least to pay lip service to the fact that every life matters right up to its end. There are, though, accompanying debits. Death is now more likely to be euphemized through managerialist phrasing and processes, and, since the market reforms of the NHS from the Thatcher era onwards, the experience of dying turned into something measured against regulatory market mechanisms and benchmarks. Death is still seen as failure, a *negative outcome* in medical parlance, although the agony of many of the deaths suffered in the 1960s can now be eliminated by the syringe driver that delivers a steady stream of morphine. Between my grandfather’s death and the sigh of that young medic, exhaled with off-the-shelf solicitude, lies a rich history of dying and the meanings we attach to it. We could learn much about social and cultural change in these years by exploring how lives differently ended.

The day after my father died, my brother, liaising by phone with the undertaker, had to deal with a brief confusion: two Michael Morans had died in Wythenshawe Hospital in the early morning of 3 April 2018. The coincidence is hardly miraculous. Wythenshawe is a large hospital, and the name is common enough among men of my father’s age of Irish descent, who populated Manchester in the postwar years as much as Birmingham. But it gave me the same head-spinning epiphany that I imagine he got, aged nineteen. All these lives are ending quietly offstage – whole universes of meaning, memory and desire, vanishing into black holes as the oxygen supply cuts off at the stem of their brains, and the world is just going endlessly, callously on.

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