

## WATERLOO SUNSET

*From the Confessions of an Austrian Anglophile*

by H. W. Valerian

WATERLOO STATION IS A RAIL TERMINUS in central London, not far from Westminster Bridge, south of the Thames. Trains approach the station from the south, via Clapham Junction and Vauxhall Station. When a train is pulling into the station – very slowly, due to narrow bends and numerous points – and if you are sitting at a window on the left-hand side of the carriage, you might catch a fleeting glimpse, between hideous concrete office blocks, of the Houses of Parliament on the far bank of the Thames, in particular of Victoria Tower. And if it is evening, the sky fairly clear, then it may be that the tower is glowing in the dark red light of the setting sun.

The first time I witnessed this spectacle was in the summer of 1973. And inevitably, spontaneously, I could hear the sound of the Kinks' guitars in my mind, and then the lyrics:

*Dirty old river  
must you keep rolling  
Flowing into the night...*

They sing about all those people, crowds, and all of them terribly busy, it makes you feel dizzy; but he doesn't mind being alone, the singer assures us, for

*As long as I gaze on  
Waterloo sunset  
I am in paradise.*

That summer I spent a few weeks with a family near Guildford, a medium sized town about 40 kilometres southwest of London. ‘Hotel Morrison’ in Newbury was fully booked, as my aunt had informed me with deep regret. If I remember correctly it was she who had found me the place near Guildford. Although I had my own reasons as well – a girl I had met at university had planned to go to Godalming as an au pair, and on her days off we would have explored London together. However, shortly before our departure she learned that she had been awarded a valuable grant to a far away country; and consequently, my clever schemes came to nothing.

The name of the family I was staying with was Mungavin. They lived on a new estate outside Guildford, made up of uniform houses arranged in well-planned informality. ‘Taylor’s Crescent’, it said on their address, although the street only bore very faint resemblance to the moon, whatever its phase. They resided in one of a row of so-called town houses: rather narrow buildings which compensated for their narrowness by having two floors upstairs rather than the usual one. From the outside, the houses were of modern appearance, whitewashed with dark wooden panelling at the top. Inside, the design required steep narrow stairs – a lot of climbing. The kitchen and dining area (which could have been one room – I forget) were on the ground floor, the sitting room upstairs.

Mister Mungavin was a medical doctor, but not a practising one; he worked for a pharmaceutical company in Surbiton, a suburb of London. He must have held a prominent position there. At least that is what I inferred, partly from the way he behaved, and partly from the car he drove. The latter was one of those big Citroëns with their unique design, easily recognizable and very much part of the late Sixties and early Seventies culture. The models also featured a number of spectacular innovations such as a hydropneumatic suspension system which allowed the ground clearance to be adjusted; and the front lights followed the steering of the front wheels around a bend. Readers of my age may remember the model (especially if they are male).

At that time, foreign cars were a rare sight on British roads. They stuck out and invariably provoked a curt and slightly sneering comment: ‘posh’. They demonstrated their driver’s wealth and status, and that was exactly what they were meant to do; in addition, they may also have

implied a cosmopolitan outlook, open-minded and – in the case of French models – even a hint of *savoir-vivre*. The really rich, on the other hand, usually drove English cars, stylish understatement that started at the level of a Triumph Stag or a Jaguar and culminated with a Bentley or a Rolls Royce. These in turned signalled traditional values, landed wealth, family, school ties, hunting.

It has to be said, however, that conspicuous foreign cars had hardly ever been purchased the usual way, i.e. by their owners; rather, they were so-called company cars, part of the pay packet. That used to be – and, I assume, still is – common practice; so common in fact that the driver of such a car was automatically considered a high-ranking manager, ‘business people’. Like Mr. Mungavin.

But it wasn’t just his car. The whole man seemed to ooze importance. He was a person of considerable weight, no doubt, quite literally: a tall, massive body – in fact, it would hardly have been offensive to call him fat. I can remember how he used to heave himself out of his Citroën, heavily snorting and grunting: a sophisticated operation involving the dashboard, the door and the roof. He can’t do that too often in the course of a day, I thought. What I cannot remember is how he negotiated the steep stairs in his town house.

Nevertheless, Mr. Mungavin instilled respect, no doubt about that, and he did so from the very first moment. It was obvious that he was used to giving orders; and it was just as obvious that he was *not* used to encountering opposition. When he asked me a question, I could not help but try to keep my answers short and precise, anxious not to waste the important man’s precious time. Not that he asked a lot of questions; certainly not after he had satisfied his initial curiosity about that exotic being which had suddenly appeared in his territory. And even then, he did not seem to be particularly interested in my answers. I did not see him too often, anyway. During the day he was out at work, and when he came home I avoided crossing his path. Didn’t want to be a nuisance.

Mrs. Mungavin, on the other hand – Joyce – was tall and thin as a rake. Side by side, the two would have made an odd couple, if – well, if I had ever seen them outside their house. But that never happened. My only memory shows them in their kitchen, him sitting at the table, her towering above him. Apparently he had just come home and was getting

his dinner. It made you wonder how their marriage worked. Or, to be precise, it should have made me wonder, but it didn't. At that age, I simply took everything as it came – and thought myself terribly experienced and world-wise as well.

During the day, Joyce shared the house only with a cat and a dog. The Mungavins had two sons, but they were at a public school. It was a fairly expensive one, I gathered, situated in Epsom (more famous for the horse racing), and especially catering for the offspring of the medical profession. Their school year was still in progress so that the two made their appearance later.

Joyce spent her days in front of the telly. This can be taken quite literally – she even had her lunch upstairs in the living room, skilfully balancing a small tray on her pointy knees. She loved watching sports programmes. British television met her taste as on one of the channels, there always seemed to be an endless live broadcast of some golf tournament or cricket match.

Now, both of these sports move at a rather leisurely pace, as we know. How they could be broadcast live, and how anybody could watch such a broadcast continuously – well, all that was an intractable enigma to me at that time (and it still is). I knew a little bit about golf, at least, as I had worked as a caddy at the local golf club near Innsbruck one summer. I have to say, however, that my experience there – with the players as well as with their companions – implanted a dislike of the sport that has lasted (although I concede that the social composition of the golf playing community may have changed in the meantime – perhaps). At any rate, I had an idea how the game worked: its rules, and its goals.

Not so with cricket. And that constituted a major gap in my education as a student of English, as I was well aware. Cricket is an integral part of what is commonly regarded as 'English', so that the word alone will evoke the smells and tastes, the colours and sounds of England, its atmosphere. Or, to be precise: of a very special segment of England – southern, rural, middle-class. And this is the very segment that has usurped the essence of 'Englishness', both for itself and for outsiders. But even knowing this would not have changed anything about the fact that from the beginning I was growing into exactly this Southern English

middle-class and that I was about to get acclimatised there. Cricket would have been an integral part. Would have –

With the help of the TV-set, Joyce undertook the task of introducing me into the mystery. Unfortunately I have to confess that her success was strictly limited. After all her endeavours I summarized my comprehension – silently, of course, in my mind:

A number of men in white stand around on a beautiful green lawn. They don't move a lot, only now and then. One of these men suddenly starts and throws a small ball. Another man hits it with a flat piece of wood. Short commotion, restrained applause from the spectators. The first man starts again, throws the ball, it is hit again and flies through the air. No reaction whatsoever, neither from the players nor from the spectators. After a certain time, they all go and have tea. No wonder that traditional cricket matches can go on for days.

In the meantime I have read that you can only understand cricket fully if you have played it yourself. Well, that was some comfort. After all it not only excludes foreigners but more than half the British population as well, most notably the female half. Maybe that's the idea in the first place? Talk about the sport is cloaked in sophisticated jargon involving 'runs', 'innings' and even the word 'century' for one hundred – just don't ask, one hundred of *what*.

One may understand how delighted I was when a short time ago I finally encountered a description which did the honourable game justice. I found it on the website of the *Guardian*, in one of those online discussion threads that seem to be all the rage these days. Actually, the subject of that particular discussion was not even cricket, it was football. The contributors were agitated by the fact that the first female referee in England had not just applied the intractable offside rule, but had done so correctly, as it turned out. Considering such problems, a certain Stan Grain from London wrote, he preferred cricket. The rules were so much simpler there:

'You have two sides, one out in the field and one in. Each man that's in the side that's in goes out, and when he's out he comes in and the next man goes in until he's out. When they are all out, the side that's out comes in and the side that's been in goes out and tries to get those coming in, out. Sometimes you get men still in and not out. When a man

goes out to go in, the men who are out try to get him out, and when he is out he goes in and the next man in goes out and goes in. There are two men called umpires who stay out all the time and they decide when the men who are in are out. When both sides have been in and all the men have been out, and both sides have been out twice after all the men have been in, including those who are not out, that is the end of the game!

Indeed. The fact that the referee is called 'umpire' in cricket adds to the Byzantine mystery of the game. The word goes back to Old French, my *Oxford Dictionary of English* informs me. –

Joyce was well aware of the fact that her life style was not quite what it should have been. Well, she seemed to indicate – shrugging her shoulders, raising her eyebrows, rolling her eyes – well, that's the way it is. Human nature. Nothing you can do.

Over the years I have observed this sort of reaction quite frequently, especially in middle-class women (upper rather than lower, to be accurate). At first, I found the attitude quite appealing – at long last, somebody who's honest! There is a second side to it, however. In this way, a young mother may excuse her offspring's intolerable behaviour, in a pub for example, where they are spoiling everybody's evening with their well-nurtured selfishness.

'The brats.' Shrugging her shoulders, rolling her eyes. 'What can you do?'

(Well, you could... Lots of things you could do. Teach them manners, for a start. – But that's not what we say, is it?)

There is hardly an act of impudence, of elbowing or queue-jumping, that cannot be excused in this way. And needless to say, this is exactly what happens – always supported by a bright smile on the pretty face, perfect manners and cold-hearted charm.

Joyce, in contrast, fascinated me because back then, in the summer of 1973, I thought I was catching a glimpse of the future. As an Austrian I would never have thought of spending my days in front of the telly; and the reason was not only that in those days, the Austrian broadcasting corporation was far from offering programmes throughout the whole day. True, we sometimes watched live broadcasts of sports events: important downhill races on a Saturday morning in winter, Lauberhorn and Kitzbuehel; or international football matches. But apart from that? In

Austria, the order still was: get out! Watching the telly wasn't really considered an activity. The only *real* thing was what you did outdoors. Especially in the Tyrol. In that part of the world, the alpine super-ego can cause feelings of deep guilt if a person is not out and about on a bright day, up in the mountains, no matter how: walking, running, crawling, pushing pedals, precariously sliding on snow. No excuses – as a matter of fact, the alpine super-ego does not even accept mitigating circumstances: immovable and unshakeable like a rock. There is only one command, the very first one, the categorical inner-alpine imperative: 'Up, up!'

To be sure, all kinds of sports are pursued in England, and – willy-nilly – in all kinds of weather; and in these Isles you may find that the cult of physical exercise boasts disciples that are just as zealous as in the European Alps. Their number may even be the same, proportionally speaking. But only in England, it seemed to me, watching the telly for hours on end could also pass as an activity, as a lifestyle. At any rate, it seemed to be heading in that direction; and by the same token, television itself, and particularly some of its programmes – sports, entertainment – seemed to be in the process of being accepted as *reality*, just as respectable and interesting as the material world around us, on a par with the first-hand experience gained in this world.

In any case, my Austrian super-ego drove me from the house, even in the boring estate and the altogether unspectacular country between all those developments outside Guildford. You could always take a walk, and that, I have to admit, is one of my passions. In this respect I feel like an heir to the writers and intellectuals of fin-de-siècle Vienna, representatives of the famous *Kaffeehaus* culture, but not only to them – Charles Dickens, we are told, also liked to walk, punishing walks for hours and hours.

Not that I would dare put myself in the same league. As a matter of fact I only mention this in order to silence my inner-alpine super-ego, which would have demanded more, namely 'real' sport. Anyway, I started to take walks, that summer near Guildford. The country was flat, only very soft hills; a few undeveloped patches had survived between the estates, and farther out there were even fields behind high hedges. It was summer, sunny days – how could I have stayed indoors?

I even had company. I have mentioned the dog that was living in the Mungavins' house. It was a beautiful Whippet, fawn with a white breast, answering to the name of Sherry. Although it has to be said that in this case, the attribute 'beautiful' may want an explanation. On first sight, these Whippets will not appeal to everybody. They look like greyhounds, but they are smaller, about half the size. They feature the greyhounds' pointed heads and their aerodynamic body. Their backs are curved and as a result, they tend to keep their tails between their legs as if they were constantly feeling subdued, or guilty – neurotic almost. It does not help that their hind legs often start to tremble for no obvious reason.

So, Sherry kept me company on my walks. Our usual route took us through the rows of uniform houses out to a patch of lawn with rugby goals on either side – a football field, quite obviously, although it was not well kept at all, not even fenced in. And it was empty. I cannot remember seeing anybody there, ever. I felt free to throw sticks for Sherry. And that was when I realized how beautiful she was. You have to see a Whippet at full speed to understand this breed of dog. And how Sherry was running! She went after the stick I had thrown, brought it back, laid it down at my feet – and off she went again. Like a bullet, a reddish streak on the lawn almost, incredible. She couldn't get enough – and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Sherry took me to her heart. It turned out that she was not neurotic at all, quite the contrary: quiet, observant, acute, cooperative. She moved into my room at the top of the house and slept on the floor at the end of my bed – which made the Mungavins' cat claim equal rights, and I had to accept her as well. It was the first time I had become the subject of a dog's affection, and I have to admit that I was touched. Even today I can see Sherry's exquisite head and her perceptive dark eyes.

AND SO I UNDERTOOK MY EXCURSIONS TO LONDON from my base at Guildford; on my own, it is true, yet exactly as planned. Guildford is situated on the main railway line from Portsmouth to Waterloo; there were so many trains every hour that it was hardly worth the effort looking at the timetable. Most of the time I planned my day in advance: things to do, a museum, one of the sights. All the same, my first destina-

tion was always Trafalgar Square. Leaving Waterloo Station, I walked across Hungerford Bridge; ‘rail and foot bridge’, it said on the map, a steel truss construction over which trains approached Charing Cross station on the far bank of the Thames. Pedestrians used the narrow walkway on one side.

From Charing Cross it was only a few steps to Trafalgar Square. In summer, young people from all over the world populated the square, imitating its notorious pigeons. There was always a short chat, and sometimes you even met somebody who made a companion for a day. I remember that once a Spanish girl decided to come with me on the tour I had planned for that day. Her name was Sara. It turned out that she could profit not only from my command of the language, but even from my knowledge of London, although that was still rather rudimentary at the time.

One evening I had just returned to Waterloo Station, exhausted and confused after a long day in metropolis –

*People so busy  
makes you feel dizzy  
Taxi lights shine so bright...*

I was standing in the concourse with its high ceiling, at the head of the platforms, and waiting for the next train to Guildford. Two girls walked by. They were sharing a long silk scarf, each having wrapped one end around her neck. I had to smile – and that is how I caught the eye of a young woman standing a few feet away and doing the same.

‘Each to his own’, she said.

An expression I had not heard before, as I admitted freely. A conversation developed.

She was waiting for a train to Sunbury, I learned. Was I coming to London again? The day after tomorrow, maybe – Friday? Her name was Sue. Sue Jones (no fiction there).

And so I travelled to London again on Friday, my heart beating violently.

*Terry meets Julie  
at Waterloo Station...*

And there she was, to my great surprise, waiting in the vast concourse, on the very spot where we had met. I hadn't dared to hope that she would really come.

'Hello.'

'Hi –'

It was a strange feeling, actually meeting somebody at Waterloo Station, being there on a purpose, rather than just one of the masses, all those bodies and faces that flowed through the station like water, incessant streams, down to the sewers of the Underground.

*Millions of people  
swarming like flies 'round  
Waterloo underground.*

Sue led the way, leaving the station through an exit on one side, down to the banks of the River Thames. We leaned on the balustrade and looked down on the water. To our left, Westminster Bridge; at the far end, Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. Behind us, a massive grey building – that was County Hall, Sue informed me, home to the Greater London Council and the seat of the Mayor of London.

'I see', I replied mechanically.

'Said the blind man', Sue added.

(Years later I took a group of students along the same route, around the corner of County Hall – and there they were, Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, glowing red in the setting sun. The spectacle elicited a deeply felt 'Cool!' from the boys. I felt like a magician who had produced a rabbit from his hat. Today, the space does not exist any more; today this is the site of the London Eye, the famous Ferris wheel fulfilling its function as a giant milking machine for touristic cattle.)

We walked on, up the stairs to Westminster Bridge and across the Thames –

*Terry and Julie  
cross over the river  
where they feel safe and sound...*

It turned out that Sue was older than me by a considerable margin. I hadn't noticed, blissfully naive as I was. She wore one of those long skirts that were in fashion at that time, and clogs, another indispensable acces-

sory of the period. Her hair was dark, not too long, bent inwards at the end. She was not really thin, but I would not have called her buxom either.

I cannot remember exactly where we went that evening and what we did. What I do remember is that when we finally parted, she asked me if I had any plans for next week.

‘No, nothing in particular.’

‘Tuesday evening?’

She would come to Guildford, by car.

And so I was waiting in the centre of Guildford on Tuesday, at the bottom of High Street, which leads up a fairly steep hill. And again, would you believe it – Sue did indeed turn up.

Her car was a Mini. Not the original Austin Mini, of course, that had long gone by then, but a newer version produced by British Leyland, called the Mini Clubman. It looked slightly different, especially the radiator grille, and the inside was not quite as spartan as the original; even the gear lever worked as in any other car, a short vertical stick. But apart from that, it was still the good old Mini. It certainly was just as small as before.

‘You drive’, said Sue.

But I didn’t have my driving licence on me, and anyway I had never...

‘So what.’

Alright, then. I got behind the steering wheel and drove off. The first time ever in a British car, sitting on the right-hand side, shifting gears with the left. Out of the town, fields and hedges. Sue put her hand on my thigh.

‘Is that bothering you?’

‘No’, I said, but it was not true. A bit much all at once.

We didn’t know where we were going. We simply went on, left turn – right turn. Somehow, some time later, we ended up in a remote place hidden among low trees; no idea how we had got there. By now, dusk was setting in. I switched off the engine and pulled the handbrake. (Left! The first time I reached down with my right hand, but there was only the door.)

And so to bed. Or rather, on the backseat of a Mini.

No need to worry – I’m not going into any detail. As we all know, such passages are among the bleakest that modern fiction has to offer. Nor do I have the slightest intention of bragging about my adventures or my ‘conquests’; that sort of male talk inevitably makes me sick. Not to mention the fact that in the case at hand any form of bragging would have been absolutely inappropriate as I wasn’t even the conqueror but the conquered, the prey; my part was so evident that I could hardly have deceived myself.

To be honest, I’m only telling the story for one single reason – the Mini. Because of that I am able to report – not without a touch of pride, in this instance – having shared an experience which a member of my generation would rather regret having missed.

Sowing your wild oats, as the saying goes. Blunting your horns, we say in German. –

Afterwards, to a pub. I went to get our drinks: a pint of bitter for myself while Sue had tomato juice with Worcester sauce. Negotiating my way back through the tightly packed crowd, I noticed that my hands were still shaking. The smell of the tomato juice... nauseating, almost. I tried not to notice.

We met again after that evening, almost regularly. Eventually I learned more about Sue. She was married with two children. Her husband was a lecturer at some university. She was also teaching, but only part-time, evening classes at some Further Education college, or so – I am not sure I understood everything she was telling me correctly at the time.

Teaching what?

Something to do with education, child development. Originally, she had been a teacher at a primary school.

What impressed me most about Sue was her casual attitude. It was not that she was an amoral person on the whole, or that she built her life around her immorality. Quite the contrary, she seemed to be an ordinary woman, working regularly, looking after her family. True, I did not know anything about her husband, or the state of her marriage, or her family life – not only because it most definitely wasn’t my business, but also because I did not *want* to know. All the same, Sue quite obviously moved within the range of what would be called ‘normal’. No doubt she was an

inconspicuous neighbour and a reliable member of staff at her college. Consequently, I never doubted what she told me about herself. And even now, with hindsight, I think I was right.

On the other hand and at the same time, there were these secret trips to Guildford. It seemed that she was not bothered at all by what she was doing. ‘So what’, she seemed to shrug, even in this respect. That was exactly what struck me as her casual attitude. If she was not morally neutral, she certainly was unperturbed by moral questions. And when such questions come into play, chances are that ‘moral’ simply means ‘sexual’. Strangely, there seem to be few other acts of indecency that common people really get agitated about. We all know someone who notoriously drives too fast, sometimes even under the influence – but do we consider him an immoral person? Do we treat him as such? (And it is usually a *he*, no male chauvinism here.) As long as he hasn’t got anything on the side?

Sue’s attitude, by contrast – her warm, soft sensuality which came so naturally to her that she was hardly conscious of it – all that was absolutely new to me, unknown, *undreamt of* even. Where I came from, with my background, a middle-class upbringing in Innsbruck, a medium-sized town right in the middle of the Alps – well, you just didn’t get that where I came from. It didn’t exist. And it was not just because my parents were such incredible prigs – as a matter of fact their prudishness went as deep as a veritable Grand Canyon; it was also because of the girls of my age, fellow students at the university: of course they would sleep with their boy friends, no problem there, we were in the Seventies, after all – but it had to be a ‘real’ boyfriend, it had to be love, emotions, the whole sentimental armoury. Bingo. If not, these middle-class *demoiselles* were able to calculate their attractive value only too well. (A friend at university had once suggested a research project on ‘The economy of the female reproductive organs’.)

I have to admit that even now, almost 40 years later, I remember Sue with a great deal of admiration. Of course, none of us would be proud to be an ‘immoral’ person; we all want to be considered reliable and responsible members of society, working regularly, spending their hard-earned money wisely – and so on, and so on. But that’s not enough, is it? Certainly, there should be an attempt at some big-heartedness every now

and then? A small refuge, just a tiny little space in a dark remote corner, where we can allow for the unforeseen and the unforeseeable? Even now, in the 21st century?

Sue showed me all these things, way back in that summer, and she taught me that they might even be attainable – might be. That is what I am grateful for. Bless her.

THE HOUSE NEXT TO THE MUNGAVINS' was occupied by Ron and his wife. The latter will play no part in the following story, although I remember her as a nice person with a good sense of humour. Above all, she displayed an attitude that seemed to be fairly widespread among English women at that time: Faced with the antics of their male counterparts, they tended to shrug their shoulders and give a short knowing laugh, patiently indulgent: 'Boys will be boys'.

Ron earned his living as a travelling salesman, as they were called then (today, I gather, he would probably be called a sales rep). He invited me to accompany him on one of his tours. And so we set off one day early in the morning, or so it seemed to me. The first thing I remember was Ron's lecture on the new decimal currency. Since 1971, there had been 100 pence in the pound and not, as hitherto, 20 shillings of 12 pence each. 'One hundred pee', as people said now. It was a gigantic racket, Ron told me, an excuse to push up prices, we're all being led up the garden path, why couldn't they just leave it as it used to be – good enough for a few hundred years, wasn't it?

A short time later, as Ron was slowing down the car, a black bolt came rolling from under my seat. I picked it up, slightly alarmed. Ron was driving a heavy car; the interior was furnished luxuriously, and it seemed to be brand new. The beige cover on the floor looked immaculate.

So, I picked up the bolt. But Ron only laughed.

'When I get a new car, I go to my garage once a week with a handful of bolts and nuts. I simply tell these people, *put them back in place.*'

It was not quite as bad as that, I suppose, but Ron doubtlessly expressed a sentiment that was widespread at the time, especially among the middle classes: a certain kind of fatalistic despair concerning the quality of British products. Again, one may safely assume that these

products were not really as bad as they were made out. There was also a tendency to patronize: these working class people, you know, hopeless.

All the same, British products did have a bad reputation at that time. It was the era of strikes, and not just spectacular ones like the miners' strike the previous February (1972, that was). In that instance, the miners had forced the Conservative government under Ted Heath to capitulate, simply by shutting down the energy supply of the country. Somewhere in the British Isles, it seemed, there was always a strike going on, and very often the scene was some plant in the car industry. In addition, there were also sloppy standards in manufacturing, although in this case management should have shouldered the blame – too arrogant to adopt modern practices in quality assurance. (Today I know that the problem went back a long time; it had surfaced during World War II, when American standards of mass-production came to the attention of British soldiers and airmen.)

Consequently, British products acquired a bad reputation, certainly outside the UK. My parents drove an Austin Maxi, a wonderful car with front-wheel drive and – a brilliant first – five gears. Easy to drive and yet spacious, four doors plus – another first – a hatch. We loved our Maxi, no doubt, it was so practical! Unfortunately, it also needed frequent repairs. And that was when the lottery began, because when my father took the car to the garage, nobody could tell him how long he would have to wait for the spare parts – there might be a strike on, you see. –

The first leg of Ron's tour took him to the Channel coast, to Rye in Sussex. That's how I heard about the Cinque Ports for the first time (pronounced as 'sink ports'): a group of medieval ports that used to be important as defences against France, and that won considerable privileges as a consequence, a special status even. Dover was one of these ports, together with Folkestone, its 'limb' (whatever that may have been); another was Hastings. Rye also belonged to the group, but not as a full member, only sort of, as an 'Antient Town'. Today, all this is of no significance whatsoever, apart from the picturesque history. Rye is not even on the coast anymore but a few miles inland, due to changes in the coastline.

Nevertheless, I had learned something – another piece of information: Cinque Ports. Sounds good, doesn't it?

The return journey took us into London: to Croydon first, and then to Brixton. Ron had to see a client there, he explained, at the market. At that point, I had no idea what that implied. That did not come until we had parked the car, got out and turned the corner –

I couldn't believe my eyes. The colours! The smells! Although we were not the only white people at the market, we certainly stuck out. We were just as conspicuous as the first Africans that had turned up in Innsbruck when I was a child – students at the Catholic seminary, mostly. I thought I got an inkling of how the proverbial sore thumb must feel. Not that the people at Brixton market paid us special attention; they neither stared nor pointed at us. And yet, we were 'different', no doubt about that, and somehow, mysteriously almost, you can feel it, even from behind, through your skin.

Rows and rows of stalls, in a curved street between red-bricked houses, typically English, which made the scene even more exotic; out into a wide sunny space, with long covered arcades on the far side. Unknown fruits of bright colours, vegetable, meat, fish – the smells simply defied description, all mixed into one rich, complex odour. And the noises, the constant chatter; it reminded me of the Italian *mercato* I had experienced as a child, on our holidays at the Adriatic, although this one was gigantic in comparison, and above all it seemed to be located in the heart of Africa. And yet, we were still in Brixton, not very far from the centre of London.

And that's exactly how Ron saw it: 'Little Africa', he said.

He laughed – but it was an unpleasant laugh. It sounded contemptuous, sneering even, and also resigned in a way: What has this country come to?

By contrast, I was fascinated how ordinary it all seemed, normal and everyday: the women buying fruit or leafing through the cheap blouses on the racks outside the shops; squeezing through the crowd between the stalls; black women, to be sure, and yet I felt that I knew them – your average housewife and mother. I have never found out if I was right or if I was just being naive.

Black wigs – rows and rows of stalls, one after another, masses of wigs were lying or hanging there, on display, for sale. Why? Certainly, there couldn't be such an epidemic loss of hair?

I turned to Ron. He laughed again, exactly as before. Straight hair, he explained.

And then I could see it myself. The wigs imitated the shiny black colour of the African women's hair, but the strands were absolutely straight. Cheap synthetics. All the same, they must have been tremendously popular, otherwise they would not have been offered in such quantities. Evidently, black women were ashamed of their curls, they wanted to have hair like the white people!

And *we* tried to cultivate the Afro look. Jimi Hendrix. Quite a few girls I had met envied my wavy hair.

'It's just not fair', one of them had complained. 'What do *you* need such hair for?'

I don't know if these wigs are still being offered today; and to be honest, I can't really believe they are. Certainly, black people in Britain must have developed sufficient confidence over the years? That's what one would hope, anyway. At which point it may be appropriate to add a short remark: It seems that in Britain, the attribute 'black' does not contravene political correctness. The question was raised during a seminar for European teachers which I attended in London a few years ago. Did you have to use expressions like 'Afro-British' or 'Afro-Caribbeans', as in the USA?

We asked the two 'tea girls', lovely seventeen-year old girls who were supporting the woman running our seminar – their English teacher at the sixth form – not just with the indispensable tea, but also with photocopies, or shepherding us on our excursions through London. Our question prompted nothing but laughter – sparkling laughter from deep inside, as if they had never heard anything funnier.

No, they laughed. 'Black. That's good enough.'

Ron, on the other hand, would not have liked that state of things, either. Ron, it has to be said, was a racist. And when I use such a word, I do mean it. I don't want to be one of those people who use fly-swatter words every time they are disturbed in their quiet little ideological home. Ron was a true racist, dyed in the wool almost. His was a kind of home-grown racism, deeply rooted, and constantly reinforced by means of casual remarks that are accepted without comment, let alone argument.

Any such thing would neither be expected nor really possible. It's all too obvious. 'That's the way it is.'

In fact, Ron did not reserve his racism for black people. It was equally thrust at 'Pakis' (immigrants from the Indian subcontinent – any further distinctions were far beneath his dignity); at the Italians, the French, the 'continentals' in general, and of course at the Irish, who were the subject of a never ending series of more or less witty jokes (usually, *less*). In short, it was directed at what used to be called 'wogs' at the time. This covered practically all immigrants with a dark skin. Somebody once told me that the word was an acronym and stood for 'worthy Oriental gentlemen', but like most popular explanations of this kind, it is bound to be wrong. After all, you could also hear the laconic statement: 'Wogs begin at Calais.'

There has been a lot of change in Great Britain since then, it is true; and probably even more in Europe and in the world at large. And yet – the world view described here can still be encountered in England, and by no means among the lower middle classes alone. They are just less inhibited in uttering such sentiments and thus display more honesty, in a way, compared to the well-mannered squeamishness higher up the social scale: 'You don't *say* that, do you?'

Ron had no such qualms; and that is why I soon found out that he also qualified as a Fascist, and he did so just as unequivocally and unmistakably. *Law and order*, let the police do their job, and if they don't always keep to the rules – well, all the better, 'well done, boys'. Ron could talk about such episodes with truly felt enthusiasm, almost like a school-boy. After all, he served as a Special Constable with the Surrey Police Force. Voluntary weekend policing was new to me, unheard of in Austria, and totally unthinkable. In Great Britain, I learned, such forces existed throughout the country, and they were looking back on a long respectable tradition.

If Ron had had his way, it would have been so easy to solve even the most troublesome problems. Northern Ireland? Strikes? Inner-city crime? Send in the army, conscript the workers, let the police off the leash – 'as simple as that'.

As we all know, this state of mind is far from extraordinary. 'Common-sense reactionaries', I remember reading somewhere, a long

time ago. ‘Taproom reactionaries’ would be more appropriate, I dare say, as that is where the species finds its natural habitat.

All the same, I was intrigued by the unashamed frankness with which Ron was peddling his views. There was not the slightest trace of doubt, let alone of guilty conscience. Hardly conceivable that he could have carried on like this in Austria. Not that vulgar Fascism had died out there, far from it! I had spent enough time with the Austrian army to know better. But Austrians did not show it so openly. Even if they were really unaware of the full implications of what they were saying, they knew well enough not to be too outspoken, at least not publicly and not amongst strangers.

Ron, by contrast, turned out to be one of the most outspoken fascists I had ever met. How could that be? Once again, I traced the reason back to a completely different historical experience: *Spitfire versus Messerschmitt*. In this case, however, the result was as paradoxical as it could be, irony upon irony: ‘their finest hour’, certainly, yes – but now, because of that, they could explicitly and shamelessly...

Very strange.

MY TIME WITH THE MUNGAVINS WAS DRAWING TO AN END. On the Friday before the last weekend, the two sons appeared. Their public school had broken up and they were coming home for their holidays. They brought the noisy, boisterous behaviour of male companionship with them or rather, to be more precise, of what is called the ‘bachelor pack’.

I was glad that they only entered the stage at the end of my stay. Although they must have been a few years younger, I felt inexperienced and sissy in their presence. They seemed to be so much more streetwise than I could ever hope to be (although I’m not sure if the word was used at that time). On their first evening at home they took me to their favourite pub in the neighbourhood. They treated me a little like an exotic pet, the latest specimen in their slightly eccentric mother’s collection. In the pub, they met a number of boys of the same age and calibre. Apart from drinking lager, their attention was focussed on gambling, the fruit machines first and some game of cards later. To their surprise – and

even more, my own – I won the first round. ‘Beginner’s luck’, they said, and that’s exactly what it was. In the course of the game my lack of talent for gambling of any kind became all too manifest.

Saturday is football day in England. The two young men were fans, needless to say, an integral part of their juvenile lifestyle. In England, fans ‘have’ a club for life which they follow through thick and thin, up the league table and down again, even if it is relegated to a lower division. The young Mungavins’ club was Queens Park Rangers, QPR for short. The walls of their rooms were draped with posters of players, the club emblem, scarves and T-shirts in the club’s colours: blue and white. As proper fans they knew absolutely everything about each of the players, the coach, any conceivable version of the team’s composition, no matter how baroque.

That Saturday QPR were playing at home in London, and of course the two would attend, now that they had reclaimed their freedom. Would I like to join them?

Now, I have to confess that football normally bores me stiff. In fact, it had taken me a considerable effort to fake interest in the boys’ QPR-discussions. So far, I had been inside a football stadium only once, and that had been on a cold, miserable Saturday afternoon in November, in Innsbruck, when we, four or five friends from grammar school, had run out of ideas what to do. Suddenly, one of us thought he had heard that one could get into the local football stadium free once the second half had begun. We decided to give it a try and yes, it was true. The local team were playing a club called Vienna, if I remember correctly. According to a famous Austrian comedian, even bull fighting in Spain is nothing compared to the country’s game: ‘Austrian football – that’s what I call brutality’. Well, after my experience that afternoon in the Innsbruck stadium, I would have put it differently: ‘Austrian football – that’s what I call boring.’

All the same, I decided to join the Mungavins. First, because I did not want to provoke any more sarcastic remarks; second, because I hoped an English football match would be rather more exciting than what I had seen at home; above all, however, because it would be an experience, no matter how – and that is why I was there in the first place, to learn about the country. Cultural studies, you see.

And so we set out, the QPR fans conspicuously dressed in blue and white. By train to Waterloo, Bakerloo line to Oxford Circus, where we changed to the Central Line. The latter took us into parts I had never been to before. *Westbound*. That evoked images of wagon trains on limitless prairies – although our journey did not take us quite so far west, needless to say. All the same, the names of some of the stations on our route did convey a whiff of adventure, of the wide, wide world – Shepherd’s Bush; White City.

To my surprise, the stadium only served its primary purpose, football, and nothing else. There was no dirt track, nor any other facilities that you would have found in an Austrian arena. The stands seemed to start right at the touch line. They rose steeply up to the root of the cantilever roof. All this produced a slightly claustrophobic effect, narrow and cramped. It was reinforced by the fact that the stands were packed to the very last space, quite literally. QPR met West Ham United that afternoon, another London club from the other end of town, the east. We stood tightly wedged between the other blue-and-white fans. That alone sufficed to make me feel uneasy. As if that were not enough, I discovered that I was standing on a narrow wooden plank, hardly wider than the length of my shoes. It looked rather slippery, due to the inevitable rain earlier in the day.

The match moved at a fast pace; that much I had to concede. Still – whenever the home team scored, the fans waved their hands frantically in the air, shouted full volume, and jumped on the narrow planks: surprisingly high, even dangerously so, it seemed to me, at break-ankle height (so to speak). I had no choice but to join in the jumping; that’s how tight we were packed on the stands. Secretly I started to pray that the opposite side should score the goals, please. But QPR must have been quite successful that day, as far as I remember – too successful for my taste, certainly.

As the match was drawing to an end, the two Mungavins were growing restive. They started to make their way to the nearest exit, quite rudely as I noticed, and thus un-English.

‘Quick, quick’, they kept urging me.

I managed not to lose sight of them. Eventually we found ourselves in the street outside; and indeed, we must have been among the first to get out of the stadium, as there were only few people around.

‘Run’, the elder Mungavin commanded.

Alright, then. We started to run, down the street between red-bricked houses with white window frames. Suddenly – mounted police heading towards us, galloping at what appeared to be break-neck speed on the slippery asphalt. We fled to the pavement, close to the garden walls, but we kept on running regardless. We did not pause before we reached the Underground station. The next east bound train was due to arrive directly. We only caught our breath when we sat down in the carriage. There were enough empty seats, like on any ordinary Saturday afternoon train.

Later in the evening I heard in the news that there had been trouble after the match. West Ham supporters were notorious at that time. There had been fights in one of the trains on the Central Line, windows were being smashed, the train stopped in the tunnel, fire and smoke. It must have been one of the trains immediately following ours. I had no idea how dangerous the whole thing could be! And I could not help but admire the young Mungavins for their foresight, and for their experience.

MY LAST EVENING WITH SUE. We met in the centre of Guildford as always, but when I got into her Mini, she refused my embrace.

‘Don’t.’

She had broken a rib, horse-riding over the weekend. Fallen from her horse.

‘I’m so sorry’, I said spontaneously.

But what I thought was something completely different. It was a strong, time-honoured word in my German mother-tongue: *Sch...* No matter what our relation may have been, what I felt for her, and how much I enjoyed talking to her – in the last resort, there was only one important item on our agenda: *It*. In the last resort, we were only there for jackrabbit purposes, both of us.

But that was neither here nor there. What could we do? Sue parked the car and we walked off into the evening, slowly and aimlessly.

Very roughly speaking, Guildford is built on the hills either side of the River Wey (pronounced like the word 'way'). This means that the river flows right through the centre of the town, past the lower end of High Street, which continues across a bridge over the river. To the south of the bridge, upstream, there is an extensive park with wide lawns and old, sombre trees. On the banks, willows hang their branches into the water.

The River Wey is navigable. Not far from the bridge just mentioned there is a lock. During the day, this allows idle strollers from the town to lean on the balustrade and watch the amateur crews of the narrow boats perform their rites involving gates, sluices, ropes and cranks. Along the river, more of those narrow boats are moored, ready for hire. On the opposite side, a boat house offers rowing boats. The river winds through the park, coming from the open country beyond, from the area around Godalming.

It was a warm summer night. The lights of the town were twinkling through the foliage; the low, damped sound of traffic from far away. Couples were sauntering through the park just like us; somewhere, in the middle of the lawn, a flock of twittering and giggling youths had settled down. We ended up in a quiet corner between a church and the adjacent building. It was dark, sultry, the rich smells of summer: trees, flower beds, grass, the river...

Rising pressure.

'We could go to my place', Sue said suddenly. Her husband was not at home, it turned out, gone away for a symposium.

'And what about the children?'

'They wouldn't notice.'

But at that point, and despite everything, I said No. That was simply too much for me, young male of the species that I may have been. And I was lucky, I would add in retrospect. Very likely, the episode would have turned into one of those memories that wake me up in the night, shocked at my own behaviour, disgusted. For once I did the right thing *even though* the opportunity was there.

'Alright then', Sue burst out, 'let's do it behind the bloody parsonage!'

Well. Sowing your wild oats...

But that didn't work out either. Voices were approaching, now of all times. So – what else could we do? Back to Sue's Mini, and out into the country. –

It may be remembered that back in the Sixties, there was a kind of sport, 'car cramming' it was called: How many persons fit into a Mini? It reached its peak when fifteen mini-skirted girls crammed into a Mini. Their long legs were sticking out of the windows, high-heeled shoes pointing into the air. The pictures went around the world, and the result was duly recorded in the *Guinness Book of Records*.

We should also have merited such an entry, I think, Yours Humbly and Sue with her broken rib, together on the back seat of her Mini...

I NEVER SAW SUE AGAIN AFTER THAT EVENING. I got in contact with the Mungavins the following year when I was living in Farnborough, not all that distant from Guildford. And that led to an episode which I remember mainly because it offered a glimpse into a world that has remained alien to me by and large.

Doctor Mungavin asked me to give one of his staff German lessons. Payment would be generous, he said, covered by the company. We met in an expensive restaurant. Not that I was too pleased – I felt ill at ease, conspicuously underdressed in my student's trousers and jumper, awkward and self-conscious. Mr. Mungavin introduced me to my future pupil: Rick, a young man in his early thirties (my estimate), smartly dressed in a light grey suit, white shirt and tie. Any German at all? None whatsoever.

And that was the end of my part that evening. The ensuing conversation revolved around one subject only: Rick was trying to get a pay rise. That is how I became witness to pay negotiations, for the very first and last time. Mr. Mungavin made it absolutely clear that any such thing was out of the question for the time being. Rick should learn German first; additional qualifications, gaining experience, successful talks with German partners, and then we'll see. But Rick wouldn't let go. He seemed to wriggle and writhe, trying to manoeuvre around Mr. Mungavins firm authority. He just wouldn't take No for an answer (an expression that I have associated with that particular evening ever since). He

kept on arguing: coolly and rationally at first, then slightly more urgently, until he came near to begging with an astonishing lack of pride. And then he started again, soberly listing his arguments one after another, full circle. I had to admire Mr. Mungavin's patience – that it was being tried severely was all too obvious to me. Which is why I felt terribly embarrassed the whole evening; so embarrassed in fact that my armpits were dripping with sweat.

In the end, we did not have too many German lessons. Rick shared the common notion that one could learn a language on the quick and without too much effort – a kind of Nuremberg Funnel. When he realized it did not work that way, he instantly lost interest. I think I only met him two or three times, in some restaurant or pub in the evening. We had a good time, to be sure, all expenses paid. One evening we concluded our session with a few glasses of expensive whisky. When I got home and tried to climb the steep stairs quietly, I had to support myself with the help of the walls on both sides. That's how I learned an important thing about the stuff: you don't know how much you have had until you've left the table. Or you're climbing stairs.

One day I visited Joyce. As it was during the school year, her sons were not at home, and Mr. Mungavin was at work. Was she glad to see me? Hard to tell, because her reaction was the same as always: fatalism tinged with irony. If anybody was glad to see me, and that without any trace of reservation, inhibition or ambiguity, it was Sherry. Even before I had stopped ringing the doorbell I could hear her feet drumming down the stairs, and then jumping at the door. And then – well, we all know the kind of welcome a dog can offer. She was all over me, quite literally. Good old Sherry!