

THE
FORCE
OF
THINGS

A MARRIAGE IN WAR AND PEACE

ALEXANDER
STILLE

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The Force of Things

I. LISTS

Most of her life my mother made lists. Laundry lists, grocery lists, lists of errands, of Scrabble scores, of vices and virtues, New Year's resolutions and household repairs. For a number of years, early in her marriage, she kept careful accounts of her monthly expenses in various bound ledger books:

groceries \$9.25
dry cleaning \$1.75
maid \$12
liquor \$3.00
cigarettes \$1.50
Lucy's jacket \$10.00

These ledger books are mostly blank. Good intentions tended to run out by mid-month. My father, during these years, kept her on a pretty tight leash, with a monthly allowance she considered entirely unreasonable. They would often argue about money, along with other things. Perhaps in order to mollify my father and justify herself, she would begin to keep careful accounts, nickel by nickel, dollar by dollar. But these efforts at household economy would soon fall by the wayside, as she would revert to her generous, free-spending ways.

Throughout her life, she woke early, long before everyone else in the house, sat in bed, and drew up lists. After her death, I found many of them, by her bedside table, by the phone downstairs, tucked into drawers. Unlike her monthly budget, she followed through on these rigorously, crossing out errand after errand as the day went by.

She was neat and fastidious, and—perhaps in reaction to my father’s tendencies—kept as little paper around as possible. What she kept was important. In the back of one drawer, I found a faded, yellowing list that had been made by her college boyfriend, Clinton Rossiter, probably in the late 1930s, when they were both at Cornell. Perhaps she got her passion for lists from Rossiter, or perhaps she gave it to him, asking him to draw up a list of what he did and did not like about her.

ELIZA IS:

1. A snob.
 2. too dramatic.
 3. ignorant of her possibilities and responsibilities.
 4. ————[crossed out]
 5. naturally lazy.
 6. often dumb.
 7. no puritan.
 8. a lover of lots of suitors.
 9. a coed. [underlined three times]
-
1. refined and fine looking.
 2. natural and without airs.
 3. intelligent, if and when she wants to be.
 4. loyal.
 5. sweet.
 6. good-dresser.
 7. no hypocrite.
 8. my girl, and my fortress in the storm.
 9. and wow! what legs. (How do you know, Rossiter?)

signed: Clinton Rossiter, III, President of USA.

Despite its irritatingly condescending tone, this list of faults and virtues contains some elements of truth: “no puritan, a lover of lots of suitors, a coed, refined and fine looking, good-dresser, no hypocrite, and wow! what legs.” My mother was something of a wild, rebellious girl. She bucked against the restrictions of her loving but decidedly puritanical mother. Her girlhood letters are full of fast cars and “swell” boys. To

discipline her coltish daughter, my grandmother sent my mother to a Quaker boarding school in distant Pennsylvania. While high-minded, the school was coed, and my mother seemed to have little difficulty finding trouble. She was always being disciplined for wearing lipstick and smoking cigarettes and staying out late. My grandmother must not have been that strict or disapproving, because my mother is remarkably confiding about her various romantic adventures in her many letters home.

One letter—partly in the form of a list—written when she was sixteen begins:

Sunday

Dear Mummy,

I'm sorry I haven't written you sooner but, you see, I've gone and fallen in love again. I'll tell you all about him,

Name—Charles Edward Lippincott—commonly known as Ted.

Age—Seventeen

Class—Senior

Occupations—waiter on tables, collector of stamps and pigeons.

Looks—Black hair, brown eyes, marvelous semi-snob nose, very white teeth, tall, medium weight, about 5'10"1/2

The first lists I've found also date from this period. In a letter from boarding school she lays out exactly what money she will need to get home when school ends in the spring:

\$8.25—Pullman

\$2.00—trunks lugged to Paoli

\$1.60—transportation to Philly

\$3.00—meals and tips

\$14.85

Another of my mother's lists I found, unexpectedly, among my father's things. Unlike my mother, he kept reams and reams of paper so indiscriminately that important papers could easily get tossed out with last month's newspapers or six-year-old junk mail. I almost threw out, in a suitcase full of old bank statements from the early 1960s, a partially torn

envelope with a long list of words on it in my mother's unmistakable handwriting.

It didn't take more than a second to understand that the list referred to my father.

nagging
suspicious
pettiness
anxiety
cruelty
recrimination
selfishness
coldness
disorganization
stinginess +
other forms of ungenerousness

complete lack of:
gentleness
humor
tolerance
consideration
common sense
generosity

On the back side of the envelope, in pencil, was a second, shorter list that I am certain referred to herself:

lack of confidence
easily influenced
easily confused
weak-minded, in other words.

But this list appears to have been lost and forgotten. I wonder whether my father intended to keep it or if it ended up among his bank statements by chance.

There was another list I only heard about but didn't see, which she

made after the fire at my parents' New York apartment. The fire took place in 1981, when I was living in Italy. My father worked at home in his pajamas, smoking and drinking coffee until about four o'clock in the afternoon, when he would send his daily story to his newspaper in Milan. His office was filled with enormous piles of newspapers and magazines. He received several daily papers and subscribed to at least a few dozen magazines, in some cases keeping every issue from 1946. The office—and his messiness—was everything my mother hated, a kind of jungle of wild, irrational disorder she tried to keep at bay with her lists. He smoked a pipe and routinely emptied it in a wastebasket full of paper. He had started a few fires, but never one this serious. He had gone downstairs after filing his story, walked around in his pajamas, and began rummaging through the refrigerator. My mother had gone out to run some errands. He was talking on the phone to his paper in Milan when the firemen burst through the front door with their axes. His office had gone up in flames; a neighbor had seen the fire from across the street and called the fire department. Most everything in his office was burned and the upper floor was flooded with water. When my mother returned, she found the fire trucks outside, smoke everywhere, doors broken in, glass shattered, phones melted in the heat, water pouring from the upper floor through the ceiling of the living room. Many of my father's books upstairs had been burned or singed with smoke; the ones downstairs, the best, were now in danger of being destroyed by water. My father was still in his pajamas, walking around moaning, but not doing anything. "Oh, my god, what an idiot I am!" he said. "I might as well kill myself!" "Don't you think you've done enough damage for one day?" my mother said, with her characteristic deadpan humor. She immediately set to placing garbage bins, wash pails, and pots and pans underneath the leaks in the ceiling to catch the flooding water. By sheer happenstance, my sister, Lucy, and her boyfriend turned up in the afternoon and immediately began helping my mother as my father moaned on. Then two friends of my parents stopped by for a drink. They had all arranged to go to a party of mutual friends. My parents, in the midst of the fire, had forgotten about the appointment. "Please, take Misha," my mother told them. "He's of no use to us here." And so my father went off to the party, while my mother, my sister, and her boyfriend cleaned up the house.

Afterward, they went out to dinner and my mother started writing a list.

Insurance company
Window repair
Carpenter
Locksmith
Plastic bags
Cleaning service
Divorce?

When she died, she left very few papers behind. Only a few letters, photographs, and the Rossiter list in the drawer of her bedside table. She traveled light and died light. All her bills were paid, her will written, signed, and with the lawyers, nothing much for us to do. Lucy and I were surprised by her death, even though she had been very sick for nearly two years. She never told us how ill she was at the end and she never asked us to come. I was in Rome, Lucy in Los Angeles. My mother had taken care of it all in advance, as if her goal was to be as little trouble as possible. She was like a guest in this world, who didn't want to be a bother and slipped away before the rest of the household awoke. I did find a list by the side of her bed that she had been keeping in the days before she died—

Take vitamins
Call Doctor R.
Get cash
Pay Lillian
Write check to Bruno
Check on oil heater in Great Barrington

Everything on the list had been meticulously marked off.

2. NAMES, DATES, AND PLACES

My father died, as he lived, surrounded by newspapers.

They piled up like snowbanks in a blizzard in a world where it snowed newsprint every day.

While my mother was alive, she had tried to confine his mess to his office-bedroom, but after she died, the newspapers gradually crept down the stairs and began taking over the apartment like tropical vegetation

reclaiming land that had been painstakingly cleared, the fragile progress of civilization returning to jungle. As the months passed, piles of newspapers took over the downstairs coffee table, colonized the surfaces of the living room cabinets, spread out and made themselves comfortable on the two living room sofas, drifted to the dining room, first covering one end of the table and then half the table, so when you joined my father for dinner, you would sit at one end and stare at a growing stack of papers. If you suggested moving them (even temporarily) he became agitated. The chairs at that end were gradually converted into newspaper storage devices. My father had always slept in the bed in his office, but the bed was swallowed up by papers and he moved down the hall to what had been my mother's bedroom, an inner sanctum that had always been kept inviolate of any clutter—and the newspapers and books and magazines invariably followed. When he failed to answer the doorbell and we had to call the fire department to break down the door to his apartment, we found him in his pajamas (as he had lived and worked for most of his life) on my mother's bed, newspapers and books on the bedside table and a few scattered on the bed next to his body. His heart had given out before the newspapers could complete their work and bury him.

A refugee of two countries—first Russia and then Italy—whose family had been forced to flee with only what they could carry, my father could not bring himself to throw anything away. His closet was a kind of rest home for retired clothing: shoes that had curled in half with age, whose leather was hard and cracked and brittle; ties with irremovable stains and visible burn holes from the embers of his pipe; moth-eaten sweaters and shirts frayed almost to rags. There were strange and wildly improbable items—purple suede chukka boots, a camel's hair Nehru jacket, a debonair sailor's cap—that were impossible to imagine on my father, a short and stout European intellectual with thick black glasses, without laughing out loud. Clearly they represented fashion fads that had mercifully passed or moments of temporary consumer insanity that had been quickly regretted and consigned to oblivion but never thrown out. There were suits that were literally six sizes too big or too small, but nothing—not all my mother's entreaties—could convince my father to give them to the Salvation Army or throw them out.

And yet, paradoxically, through diametrically opposite means—the one through the rigorous paring away of everything nonessential, the other through the inability to throw anything out—my parents ended up

in the same place: each preserved surprisingly few personal papers. My father's need to keep everything meant that he kept track of nothing. His own personal documents, letters from friends and family, his own stories, all got mixed up together with the piles of newsprint that took over his office. He knew and had received letters from many of the leading Italian writers and journalists and politicians of his generation, but he made no effort to save them. They disappeared invariably into one of the stacks in his room and were eventually swept away in the tide of paper that flowed in and out of his study. The important things were carried away with the junk mail like topsoil washed away in a flood. Others must have been consumed in the fire.

Among the few papers my father did make an effort to conserve was a single half-piece of cheap, yellowing typing paper containing just two lines:

Ilya Kamenetzki, May 19, 1884, Kreutzburg, Latvia
Sara Altschuler, April 17, 1886, Moscow, Russia.

These were his parents' names, the dates and places of their birth in my father's own handwriting.

Why would he have needed to copy out such basic information about his parents—surely everyone knows his own parents' names and birth-dates by heart—and keep it tucked away in a cardboard shoebox in the bottom of a closet together with the deeds to our house and other important legal and financial documents?

The seemingly simple fixing of names and dates and places was a highly complex matter for Jews of my father's and his parents' generations, who were almost inevitably born in one country with one name and almost invariably died in another under another name—often with multiple passages and mutations in between.

Perhaps the most notable thing about the piece of paper my father kept in the shoebox is that one of its principal facts is wrong. My grandfather was not born in Kreutzburg, Latvia; he was (as far as we know) born in Mir, a town near the Russian-Polish border in what is now Belarus. But when Mussolini allied himself with Hitler and passed anti-Semitic laws in 1938, and my father's family was forced to leave Italy and tried to get into the United States, he refashioned his identity as a Latvian.

Au: 1st pass proofreader to avoid "But..."/ "When..."/ "But when..." (see 1st pass wording on 10A, attached) Ok?

At the time, the American government was working hard to limit immigration—it had adopted a strict quota system specifying how many people it would admit from each country. The quota to which you were assigned depended on birthplace. My grandfather had been born as a Russian subject, but his native village, Mir, now belonged to Poland, and so my grandfather would have had to apply under the Polish quota, which was massively oversubscribed. The Latvian quota, however, was still open: after all, Latvia had existed for only a heartbeat. It was created in 1920 and would be occupied by the Nazis in 1941. Stuck between the hammer and the anvil, Hitler's Germany to the west and Soviet Russia to the east, many real Latvians found it difficult to emigrate, leaving room for an imaginary Latvian, my grandfather.

In Italy, my grandfather survived a dizzying series of legal and semi-legal *escamotages*. As a non-Italian whose degrees were not initially recognized in Italy, he practiced dentistry at the beginning through a typically Italian formula, using a *prestanome* (literally someone who lends his name) under whose name my grandfather's dentistry office was registered.

It is typical of these lives, with their documents of false or questionable information, that we do not know when my grandfather entered Italy or exactly when my grandmother and their two children joined him.

In keeping with this family tradition of malleable names and dates, my father's own name changed numerous times over his lifetime. He was born as Mikhail Kamenetzki in Moscow and died as Michael U. Stille in New York. In the family and to many friends he was known as Misha, sometimes written as Mischa or Miscia. Throughout his writing life he was known as Ugo Stille. And there were people who called him Misha, Michael, Ugo, and even, most improbably, Mike.

Like many of my grandfather's fictions, the name Stille was invented during the Fascist period at the time of Mussolini's racial laws. One of the many provisions of these laws was that Jews were no longer allowed to publish in Italian newspapers. At the time, my father was a university student and had the opportunity to write for a magazine, *Oggi*, which was as close to being independent as something could be under Fascism. But, being Jewish, he needed to write under an assumed name. My father ended up writing a column, together with his best friend, Giaime Pintor, under the name Ugo Stille. "*Stille*" means silence in German, and it seemed a good name for a pseudonym. They wrote separate stories on alternate

weeks but using the same name, which suited the fact that they had become inseparable friends.

My father left for the United States in 1941, and Giaime (a Sardinian variation of James, pronounced “Jai-may”), who was not Jewish, remained behind. When resistance to Nazism organized in 1943, Pintor used Ugo Stille as his *nome di battaglia*, his partisan code name. My father—both to honor his friend and because he had become known writing under his assumed name—made Stille his legal last name, becoming in effect Mr. Silence. Thus, he always published under the name Ugo Stille and became, under American law, Michael Ugo Stille. Although adopting the name Stille was an act of remembering his bond with Giaime, it was also, at the same time, a way of erasing important parts of his past and identity. Kamenetzki, the name under which he had been born and left Russia, the name under which his family had been persecuted in Italy, was gone. Stille, as a name, is hard to place. To some degree, I suspect, it was an act of camouflage and self-invention.

I remember one day in the early 1980s, my mother and father came to visit me in Italy and we met the writer Antonio Tabucchi at a party. Tabucchi was fascinated by my father’s multiple names and the fact that he had known him for years exclusively by his pseudonymous byline in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. Tabucchi had translated into Italian the great Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who wrote under more than a dozen different names, each “writer” having a distinct style and literary persona, one an ardent modernist, another a formal poet rooted in the nineteenth century, a third a surrealist, another writing in English, and so on. These figures conducted debates in Portuguese literary journals and published for years under their fictional names. Tabucchi was equally drawn to other writers, such as Borges and Pirandello, who played with multiple identities and the fragile, fictional, and provisional nature of identity. And so, when Tabucchi was presented with my father, he suddenly exclaimed: “And so, Ugo Stille really exists!” “Of course I exist,” my father replied gruffly with evident irritation—he had been ill-tempered about everything during that trip—but I think Tabucchi’s remark also hit a raw nerve. My father was a realist, a man with both feet planted firmly on the ground, and had little patience with what he would have considered nothing more than a literary parlor game, confusing curious literary speculation with the serious business of reality.

Au: Say that
G.p. was killed
in wwII?

To demolish this sort of nonsense, he liked to repeat the following story about Samuel Johnson and James Boswell during their trip to the Hebrides. Ever the follower of intellectual fashion, Boswell was spouting the latest theories of the philosopher David Hume that cast doubt on the existence of external reality. Johnson approached a large boulder and gave it a kick, saying, “Thus, sir, I refute Mr. Hume!” My father might have wanted to liquidate Tabucchi’s bit of literary cleverness and assert his existence by kicking Tabucchi in the shins. My father had, after all, lived through some of the main events of the twentieth century—the Russian Revolution, Fascism, World War II, the Holocaust—and these were not literary inventions or fictive events. But Tabucchi’s remark, although nothing more than a playful greeting, touched on something real, namely that my father was a man who had, to some extent, made and remade himself at different points in his life and that much about his history and identity was unstable—had his father been born in Kreutzberg or Mir? Did he come to Italy for the first time in 1908 or 1919 or 1922? Was my father Russian, Italian, or American? He had spoken Russian and German before settling on Italian as his preferred language. Which, then, was his native tongue? Between the passage of the racial laws in 1938 and his arrival in the United States three years later, he was essentially a man without a country, and in this time, he became the pseudonymous Ugo Stille, whose fictional existence seemed to express this stateless condition. He then became Michael Kamenezki, Americanizing it. For a time, he spelled his name Cameneschi. After the war, he then became Michael U. Stille, an American citizen whose past as a Russian and a Jew is nowhere in evidence. It was a legitimate choice but one that killed off various alternate identities—aspects of himself that, under other circumstances, he perhaps might have chosen to emphasize. They represented traumatic moments in his life and he closed them off as one cauterizes a wound, stopping further bleeding but leaving numb scar tissue in its place. At the same time, as if in some other parallel universe, he resumed his journalistic career under the name of Ugo Stille, who was closely related to but rather different from Michael U. Stille of 46 West Eleventh Street or 218 East Sixty-First Street, New York City. Ugo Stille, his journalistic persona, was an idealized self, a figure of hard logic and crystalline mental clarity, of Olympian distance and dispassionate, clear-eyed perspective on the confused human drama below. And at home, the man in his pajamas was Misha—far from Mount Olympus, surrounded

by his stacks of newspapers—highly irascible and highly irrational, storming and thundering about my mother’s latest spending spree or some magazine he suspected she had thrown out.

3. CROSS-POLLINATION

How these two very different people came together and, more incredibly, how they stayed together was perhaps the central mystery of my early life.

My parents were opposites in almost all ways, not only in matters of neatness. My mother loved vegetables; my father hated them—unless they were deep-fried breaded zucchini (an honorary carbohydrate, essentially French fries masquerading as a vegetable)—and considered the appearance of broccoli or Brussels sprouts at our family table a personal affront, to which he reacted with fury. My mother hated arguments; my father started them. My mother almost never raised her voice; my father could shout and keep on conducting an entire argument at full volume like a tenor singing his way through an opera. My mother liked eating by candlelight; my father didn’t trust restaurants with candlelight—what were they trying to hide? He insisted on turning up all the lights as if he were performing surgery when he ate—he wanted to see what he was eating. My mother loved flowers; my father considered them a useless waste of money. My mother was extremely decisive; my father agonized over every decision and then immediately regretted whatever decision he had taken. At restaurants, she never took more than thirty seconds to order and never sent anything back. My father would often change his order and then change it back again without giving a thought to whether he was inconveniencing the cook or the waiter. My mother was a big tipper; my father tipped so stingily that one of us would sometimes linger behind and leave a few more dollars on the table.

My father regarded bathing as optional. The obligation of bathing every day, which for my mother was a sacred tenet, he viewed as something of a small-minded bourgeois convention. A person, he felt, should bathe if and when he felt like it. My father was terrified of doctors and was deeply convinced that as long as he stayed away from them, he could not, technically, be sick. My mother believed religiously in modern medicine and faithfully went to every routine checkup and follow-up visit. And her faith seemed repaid: she survived four different cancers. But in

the end they both lived to almost exactly the same age and died within two years of each other. My father managed to avoid seeing a dentist for a good forty years—something of a feat worthy of *The Guinness Book of World Records* for a relatively prosperous citizen of late-twentieth-century America. Luckily for him, he had an iron constitution, and, miraculously, his teeth—though brown from decades of cigarettes and black espresso—stayed with him until the end, while my mother endured the torment of endless root canal surgeries and periodontal operations.

My mother loved gardening and being out in the country; my father felt lost outside of any city with fewer than three million people. My mother drove; my father was driven. My mother would never arrive at a friend's house without a bottle of wine or a bouquet of flowers; my father considered his presence more than sufficient. "Why are you so afraid people won't like you?" my father would say disdainfully. My father, a chain smoker, gave up cigarettes in a day when the doctor told him to stop; my mother kept smoking through a thirty-year war with cancer. My father generally drank only at parties; my mother drank every evening. My father was generally a happy and good-natured drunk; my mother became gloomy and lugubrious when she drank. My father loved large parties full of interesting people—whether he knew them or not; my mother generally preferred intimate dinner parties and the company of family and old friends. My mother was a gracious hostess and believed in making people feel at ease; my father enjoyed challenging people and freely insulted people who said things he thought were foolish, especially if they were my mother's friends. My mother almost always spoke ill of my father; my father almost invariably sang my mother's praises.

Au: rep.
intended?

As marriages go, it was a stormy one. They fought constantly—over money, over throwing out and keeping newspapers, over politics, over food, over how to behave, over friends and relatives. I recall very precisely my sister teaching me the word "divorce" after a particularly brutal battle between my parents. Because of the tumult in the house, I had been granted the special dispensation of sleeping with Lucy. I must have been very small, because I remember sitting on her bed struggling with and repeating the word, which I pronounced "di-wor-see," and struggling more with its meaning, which I found terrifying. Some years ago, I ran into some old family friends who had fallen out of touch with my parents years before. They had last seen one another at a dinner at my parents' house that had ended abruptly after my mother had thrown a glass ashtray

at my father and opened a gash on the side of his head. They had assumed that my parents had gotten divorced shortly after this incident and were greatly surprised to learn that they had stayed together until the bitter end.

My parents' union was, among other things, a marrying—or clash—of civilizations. It was the result of one of the great, perhaps the greatest, brain drains in human history: the migration of a huge chunk of educated Europe in response to the rise of Fascism and Nazism. Entire university departments—most of the great minds that conceived of and built the atomic bomb, from Albert Einstein and Enrico Fermi to Edward Teller and Hans Bethe—moved en masse. The entire Frankfurt School of philosophy, including Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer, transferred itself to Southern California, along with anti-Fascist writers such as Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht and the great avant-garde composer Arnold Schoenberg. The New School for Social Research in New York was originally named the University in Exile and was loaded with stars of Europe's best universities, including the philosophers Hannah Arendt and Jacques Maritain, the linguist Roman Jakobson, and the great French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss—all figures who changed their respective fields in the United States and around the world. The University in Exile even established something called the *École Libre des Hautes Études* (the Free School of Advanced Studies), where the luminaries of French intellectual life who had fled Nazi-occupied France lectured in French on West Eleventh Street in New York (across the street from where I grew up). It was here that Lévi-Strauss, encountering Jakobson, began to apply the theories of structuralism to anthropology.

This massive injection of talent into the collective bloodstream of this country invigorated and transformed American life. The look of major American cities was altered by the skyscrapers of Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Exiled movie directors like Billy Wilder, Ernst Lubitsch, and Fritz Lang made an impact on popular culture through films such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Apartment*, *Ninotchka*, *To Be or Not to Be*, *Scarlet Street*, and *The Big Heat*.

It is a credit to the United States that it was so open and welcomed such a large influx into its midst and integrated it into its national life. America was not a blank slate. It already had a vibrant, important culture, but what happened in the middle of the twentieth century was a genuine cross-pollination in which old met new and produced new forms. European-born artists such as Josef Albers, Arshile Gorky, and Willem

de Kooning exerted a huge influence on American artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Jackson Pollock, helping to create what became known as “abstract expressionism” and making New York and not Paris or Berlin the center of the art world. This relationship between Europe and America was not without its complexities. Vladimir Nabokov’s classic American novel *Lolita*—another great product of the mid-century brain drain—although ostensibly about the love affair between a middle-aged European man and an American teenager, is also a kind of metaphor for Nabokov’s own relationship with the American language and culture, whose vitality and vulgarity he was passionately, hopelessly, and ambivalently in love with.

A certain amount of the difficulties of my parents’ marriage were the result of deep cultural differences. My mother came from a midwestern white Anglo-Saxon Protestant world where people did not scream at one another. If they raised their voices, it meant they were getting divorced. My father came from a much more operatic culture in which people’s yelling at one another was considered fairly normal. My mother came from a position of relative security in a society that, even at the height of the Depression, was rich, optimistic, and confident. My father had the deep anxieties of someone who had been twice uprooted, twice a refugee, always in a legally precarious position, persecuted as a Jew, and hounded out of a Europe that was literally destroying itself when he and his family left it in 1941. My mother’s instinct was to trust and give people the benefit of the doubt. My father’s experience gave him a much darker, more suspicious attitude toward people.

An incident that occurred in their later years illustrates their different views of human nature. My mother had her wallet stolen while shopping at the supermarket. My father was furious and gave my mother an earful. “*Eleezabet*, how could you be so foolish, so trusting? I can just see you trotting around the supermarket with your purse unzipped!” A couple of hours later, the doorbell rang. It was a taxi driver who explained that he had found my mother’s wallet in the back of his cab. The thief had evidently taken the wallet, jumped in a taxi, took the money, and abandoned the rest. My mother was delighted to have the wallet and credit cards back and touched that the cabdriver had gone to the trouble to bring it to her at the end of his shift. For my mother, this episode reconfirmed her faith in the essential goodness of man. She—not without some difficulty—convinced my father to give her money for a generous tip for the driver.

My father, on the other hand, suspected that the driver might be in on an elaborate con scheme both to steal the wallet and to get more money out of my mother. He might have come here, my father suggested, to case the joint.

From my mother's point of view, her marriage was a kind of epic struggle, like a battle between Order and Chaos or a science fiction horror film like *The Blob*, in which the protagonists combat extraterrestrial ooze that threatens to swallow up an entire town. She had studied art, had a keen, highly refined visual sense, and had absorbed the Bauhaus school's pared-down, minimalist aesthetic. My mother's physical surroundings were fundamental to her sense of well-being. Creating a beautiful space with clean surfaces was an expression of her deepest self, like making a flower arrangement for a Buddhist monk. A glass left on a table or a dish left in the sink made her uncomfortable in her skin and in her soul, as if the universe itself was off-kilter and the planets had strayed from their orbits; she could not rest until things were put right. For my mother, my father's mess was everything she hated, was much more than mere disorder. It was a spiritual condition, a disease of the soul: entropy, despair, confusion, the weight of dusty history, the tragedy of Europe and the crippling past, the love of needless complication, useless speculation, regret, equivocation, the inability to decide and live in the present. Throwing out meant choosing, looking forward, getting on with things, having a positive attitude toward life.

At the same time, my mother's battle for order had its element of mania, too. At a certain point, she became obsessed with throwing out a collection of magazines my father had stored in the attic of our country house in Massachusetts. My father had an extraordinary set of the leading cultural-intellectual magazines of the post-World War II period. He had every single issue of *Partisan Review*; *Commentary and Dissent*; Dwight Macdonald's *Politics*; Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*; the British review *Encounter*, edited by Cyril Connolly; the Italian magazine *Tempo Presente*, founded by Ignazio Silone—the principal journals of opinion in four countries during the same period. But at a certain point, my mother was no longer satisfied that she had succeeded in relegating these to the attic of a house 120 miles from our New York apartment. The fact that they just sat there, piles of paper, clogging up the attic, began to burn a hole in her mind, to become an obsession. "We've got to get rid of those magazines!" she would tell me, banking on the fact that my father

would never notice. I tried to talk her out of it, explaining that these were rare and valuable documents. “But this isn’t a library.” I made her promise she would give them to a library rather than throw them out. She placed a call to Berkshire Community College, and when they said they didn’t want the magazines, she consigned the collection to the county dump.

In the fourth circle of Hell, Dante encounters a mass of people who are locked for eternity in a struggle, pushing a heavy weight back and forth and yelling: “Why do you spend?” “Why do you save?” It is the punishment for those guilty of the sins of avarice and prodigality. Somewhere nearby, I suspect, is a corner where my parents are wrestling over a pile of newspapers, saying: “Why do you have to throw this out?” “Why do you have to keep it?”

Losing everything twice left my father with a kind of *horror vacui*—fear of empty spaces, the irresistible tendency to fill every corner and surface. Yet, curiously, he was not an accumulator of things in general. Virtually every object, every chair, table, couch, ottoman, every painting or object on the walls, every vase, plate, dish, pot, pan, or serving spoon was brought into the house by my mother. For my father all that counted was the accumulation of printed matter. Along with the newspapers were the books.

My father was a product of that Eastern European Jewish civilization that Hitler succeeded in effectively destroying. Books and learning held a sacred place in this culture, where everything else in life could (and probably would) be taken from you.

Books were a virtual obsession with my father. His two libraries, the one in the city and the other in the country, comprised about ten thousand books. He continued collecting the best books in virtually every field up until the time of his death, from philosophy, physics, and literature to world history and, of course, politics. He was the scourge of publicity departments on both sides of the Atlantic, whom he hounded mercilessly for free books. Even now, years later, I still run into people who used to work for this or that publisher who remember my father distinctly. Sometimes in the late afternoon, after he had sent his daily story, he would, paper bag in hand like a homeless person, make the rounds of Midtown publishers, cadging books from the amiable young college graduates who generally worked in the entry-level jobs at publicity departments. He was not averse to buying books when he had to: he never made a trip to France without coming home with a suitcase full of *Pléiade*

editions, the beautiful volumes of French classics with leather bindings and fine onionskin paper.

While he was careless with his papers, he was meticulously precise with his books. Every one of the ten thousand books had its place, and he knew exactly where it was. If you took one down from the shelf and read it, he would notice within twenty-four hours and begin hounding you about it. “What have you done with that copy of Dickens?” My mother would occasionally lend a book to a friend. My father was invariably furious and would make her keep a list of who had borrowed what and then badger her to get them back. “What’s the point of having all these books if no one is allowed to read them?” my mother would ask. “You understand nothing!” he would reply with a contemptuous wave of his hand. “But you’ve never even read most of these books,” she replied. “Have you ever read this book about ancient Chinese technology or medieval warfare?” “Idiot, you understand nothing!” Collecting, of course, is a pleasure in and of itself. For my father, a great collection of books had to have both depth and balance, meaning he had to keep up with seminal works in fields he had little background in—anthropology, linguistics, art history, Renaissance philology, contemporary fiction. The building up of his library—in the midst of the piles of newspapers—meant the creation and maintenance of his own world of order and logic against the chaotic foreground of contemporary events, as messy and ephemeral as the piles of newsprint that crowded the house. He knew ancient Greek and Latin and had studied philosophy at university until his life was blown off course by Mussolini and Hitler. The pressure of events and the catastrophe of history had made him a journalist. What mattered about the books was not just what he had read or would read; it was about constructing a perfect world, the collection that he *might* read, or that someone else—some perfect scholar or polymath, the ideal man—might read. In an ideal world in which there was sufficient time and peace of mind. It was the victory of reason against the forces of darkness and chaos. And so the library was like the creation of an alternate universe, in which he was gradually creating the person that he never got to be.

These things were opaque to my pragmatic American mother (“What’s the point of having a book if you’re not going to read it?”), who saw the world as linear and rational and did not understand the ravings of a King Lear who insisted on his full retinue of knights: “Reason not the need!” And yet, after the fire he started, my mother made paper covers for the

books that had been damaged by smoke and by the firemen's hose. Some books were actually burned beyond hope; others were simply blackened on the outside. But my mother helped my father keep them by carefully making new, clean covers for them, writing the title and author's name on the front. My father appreciated my mother's aesthetic sensibility. He liked the beautiful places she created, but at the same time he considered her ideas about clutter and cleanliness little more than simpleminded mid-western philistinism, the triumph of superficial middle-class American Babbittry.

My father cited, approvingly, a passage from *The Leviathan*, in which Hobbes wrote that fear was the dominant human emotion and that he had absorbed fear along with his mother's milk, since he had been born as the Spanish Armada was making its way toward British shores. This was certainly the case for my father, whose early life was dominated by violent change and displacement. He was born in the middle of the Russian Revolution and absorbed insecurity along with his own mother's milk. My grandmother's family—wealthy Russian Jewish capitalists—had their factories and their house expropriated; with great difficulty, my father still an infant, they moved from Moscow to Germany, then to Naples and then Rome. After reestablishing themselves in Italy, they were wiped out again and had to find a way out of Europe. No sooner did my father arrive in the United States than he was drafted and sent back to Italy with the U.S. Army.

All the change and forced moves in the first twenty-five years of his life left my father with a profound desire to experience as little change and movement as possible during the rest of his life. In practical terms, this meant that he would spend as much time as possible in the next fifty years in his pajamas on the living room couch reading books and newspapers, smoking and drinking black espresso. He elevated immobility to a metaphysical level: one of his favorite novels was *Obломov*, whose main character doesn't leave his bed for the first 150 pages of the book and then does so only to move to the couch.

He would have happily remained for the rest of his life in the apartment in Greenwich Village where they were living when I was born, had the building not been sold and my parents forced to move. He experienced the act of changing apartments not as a practical problem but as a cataclysmic event that threatened his existence (as if the Bolsheviks were again about to storm the Winter Palace or the Wehrmacht was again on

the move). Once installed in the new house, he never wanted to leave—and, indeed, never did; it was there that we found him unconscious. He always took credit for finding their second apartment, and he seemed convinced that thanks only to his alacrity and foresight, the family had narrowly avoided a fate of homelessness. “*Eleezabet*, if it had been up to you, we’d be living in a tent in Central Park!” he would repeat often, recalling that traumatic move with a visible shiver of horror, imagining, no doubt, his beloved books scattered on the sidewalk for bystanders to pick among.

He was immobile but not inactive. He probably wrote something like six thousand to seven thousand newspaper stories in his lifetime, becoming a mythic figure in Italian journalism—courted by prime ministers and billionaire industrialists as the man who really understood America. In his younger days, it was not uncommon for him to write two stories a day. I would often wake up in the night and hear him clattering away on his ancient Royal typewriter, which had never been cleaned; some keys were inoperative or virtually illegible, punching holes in the paper instead of printing letters. Very often, though, the stories had to be dragged out of him. The newspaper would call repeatedly, urging him to write something. “But *theess* is of no importance!” he would say with utter disdain after putting down the phone. They would call back twenty minutes later and resume. Finally, at about three in the afternoon, he would get off the couch and you could hear from upstairs the sound—like machine-gun fire—of his banging out a story. He would then read the piece aloud to a stenographer in Milan. The phone lines were not nearly as good back then, and so he would often scream. “*Pronto!?! Pronto! Mi senti?!?*” (“Hello? Can you hear me?”) He would then finally get dressed, eat something, and go out.

Many Italians were convinced that he had fabulous inside sources at the CIA or the White House, because he seemed to know what was going to happen before it happened. While he did know many people, most of his best ideas came to him during his hours on the couch reading or in his pajamas and slippers in his office clipping and filing newspapers, listening to the radio or television. Many of his “scoops” were based on pure logical analysis. A bit immodestly, he liked to compare himself to Agatha Christie’s detective Hercule Poirot, who relied principally on his brain—“the little gray cells”—rather than the gumshoe detectives who exerted more external effort but rarely ever solved the case. He was a

great believer in what he called “*la forza delle cose*,” the force of things. Writing about daily ephemeral events, he was always looking for the underlying movement of deeper historical forces. He was very good at not being distracted by public declarations, press conferences, or individual intentions, realizing that the outcome of events is generally determined by the inner logic of the force of things.

4. UNHISTORIC ACTS

What remains of someone who has led a purely private life? My mother did not leave her mark on the world, nor did she try to. Although she had always worked, she insisted she did it for the money. Unlike the men in her life, she did not see herself as building a career that, like a monument, would represent a lifetime of achievement. (Her father’s portrait hangs in the lobby of the University of Chicago Law School.) My father left thousands of newspaper articles and is still remembered by millions of readers, and a photograph of him hangs on the walls of the *Corriere della Sera* offices along with portraits of other past editors, a little Pantheon of Italian journalism. My mother’s influence was limited to several dozen people whose lives she had touched in important ways. She had been a housewife, mother, sister, friend, and colleague. She had probably cooked twelve thousand dinners over forty years of marriage, washed hundreds of thousands of dishes, made tens of thousands of beds, and folded innumerable pairs of socks. Like the vast majority of people, she had led an anonymous life, not even imagining in her wildest private dreams that she might leave a legacy the rest of the world need concern itself with. She had not nursed unfulfilled literary or artistic ambitions, did not leave a sheaf of poems or the draft of an unfinished novel in a drawer for us to find after her death. If someone had asked her what her greatest achievement was, I expect she would have responded without hesitation: raising two children.

It was true of my mother, as George Eliot wrote of her imperfect heroine Dorothea Brooke at the end of her great novel *Middlemarch*:

Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother . . . Her

finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature . . . spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

For the most part my mother's fragile claim on immortality lay in the memories of friends and relatives, all destined to vanish sooner or later, most of them—those of her generation—very soon. Her best energies had gone into ephemeral things: a number of deep, lifelong friendships; the intimacy of long Scrabble games on summer afternoons; flower beds and vegetable gardens; tea and conversation following an afternoon of shopping or a visit to a museum; her impeccable wardrobe and a very natural, graceful sense of style; the rooms and houses she had occupied; a table beautifully set; the right arrangement of flowers; her wry, understated wit; a thousand small human connections; several thousand considerate gestures; a very genuine, unfeigned kindness to both friends and strangers; a natural empathy and curiosity that allowed her to connect with a surprisingly wide range of people. Her legacy was like that of the countless good dinner parties she gave: the warm feeling created by the excellent food and lively conversation lingered in the mind for years, though the exact content of what was said or eaten dissipated almost immediately with the aroma of the roast lamb and the taste of the chocolate mousse. It is the magical nature of beauty to be evanescent: the sudden feeling of ease between two friends who understand each other, the contagious hilarity of someone's expression in the telling of a story—which is never as funny in the retelling—the softness of the air and the clarity of light on a particular day.

As my mother's own life drew to a close, the fragility and evanescence of her life struck me with increasing poignancy and I decided to interview her, to capture a few scraps of memory while I could.

She had been diagnosed with six inoperable brain tumors in early 1992, when she and my father were living in Milan. The Italian doctor had given her only a few weeks to live, and I flew to Milan to bring her back to New York to see if doctors there felt anything could be done for

her—if only to hold the cancer at bay for a little longer. Her death seemed imminent—as it happened, she lived for another year, but death hung over us; its presence affected everything we did and said and yet it was a presence we could not name or acknowledge.

Under these very unusual circumstances, interviewing my mother seemed to offer a way—a kind of fiction or cover story—for us to talk about a lot of important things we wanted to talk about without coming out and saying: “Before you die, there are a number of things I want to discuss.” It wasn’t necessary to convince her. She was always candid and forthright and flattered by the attention. She had expressed some jealousy that I had shown a great deal of interest in my father’s family history while working on a book about Italian Jews during Fascism. “You seem to find the Italian Jewish part of your background extremely exotic and interesting and you’re not interested in the boring old midwestern Wasp half of you,” she said. Now, in this odd situation, with her confined to bed, I got out my tape recorder and we began a series of interviews over a period of a couple of weeks. She was on cortisone at the time in order to relieve the swelling of the tumors in her brain that were making it hard for her to walk and see, but the cortisone also made her excitable and extremely talkative. My mother could be brutally honest under normal circumstances, but on cortisone she had no brakes and no censors and sometimes told me more of the nitty-gritty of her life than I had bargained on. It worked almost like a truth serum, under which she dredged up detailed recollections she hadn’t talked about (or perhaps even thought about) in years: elaborate descriptions of my own birth and of her wedding day with my father, and an unvarnished narration of an extramarital affair (among other things) came tumbling out in surprisingly minute detail.

Gradually, in the years after her death, I began collecting family papers and letters, some found in the back of drawers, others in the attic of my grandparents’ farm in Michigan, where they had been left in the care of the mice but had been kept by the farmer who bought the place and passed them on to my uncle, who kindly gave many of them to me. As I put them into order and transcribed the tapes of my mother’s and father’s interviews, I began to learn a surprising amount about their lives, and something of the dense weave of their lived experience began to emerge.

While it was personally satisfying to learn that far more remained of my mother’s unhistoric life than I had imagined possible, could it have

meaning for anyone other than those of us who knew her? Sifting through the thousands of pages of documents, which were like an enormous jigsaw puzzle, I began to regard my parents and their closest relations a bit like figures I had encountered in the archives doing historical research, many of whom were as obscure as my parents—or more. The famous and the unknown partake of the times in which they live. Whether we know it or not, we are born into history and pass through a stretch of it. The zeitgeist rubs off on us and leaves its telling signs like the carpet fibers at a crime scene. Like pollen in springtime, or the fine, almost invisible dust that has covered the furniture when you return home after a long absence, history attaches itself to everything, affects the way we think and talk, the possibilities we imagine for ourselves, the choices we make or fail to make. Our lives have meaning—above and beyond our individual qualities—because we are part of and reflect the times in which we live.