

You'll never get a girlfriend

I had sticking out teeth, or so I was told. It must have been true, but I could never see what was meant. I think I can recall that it was said of my baby teeth, but the dentist said it was not worth doing anything about it until my big teeth came through, and it was only when I was about nine or ten that it became an issue. The problem was caused, apparently, by my having two extra teeth. The dentist Michael Griffiths¹ said that I was evidently intended to be twins. He was probably joking, but my mother repeated the suggestion, again possibly in jest, and I took it seriously. Along with the caul I was born with, this physical inheritance gave me a feeling of being special. The consequence of my extra teeth was unpleasant. They were removed and then I had to wear an orthodontic plate.

In those days one of the great binary divides (like Oxford and Cambridge, right or left-handed, Gentlemen and Players, posh or common, Labour and Conservative) was between gas and cocaine. When Tiggy had teeth out it was done 'with cocaine' which fitted in with her Spartan character. I had gas. This meant going up to Michael Griffiths's partner's surgery in the attic, where the gas was administered. I remember a large face looking down at me and an unpleasant metal object being placed in my mouth, like a horse's bit. Then I woke up, in Michael Griffiths's usual chair, with an unfamiliar smell in my nostrils. That night there were visitors to supper. As I was off school I helped my mother with preparations. I put out the antique wine glasses, large cone-shaped green glasses that were used on special occasions.² I suppose the adults had wine, although it's not certain, because wine was produced less frequently than the wine glasses. I remember that I had lime juice. Ever afterwards I associated the glasses and lime juice with the whiff of gas and a tight feeling at the back of my throat. Almost ten years later, when I came to entertain my own friends with wine in the green glasses, I could still detect gas in them.

The extraction was only the start of what seemed an endless process of tooth-straightening. Tiggy had trodden the path before me, with a succession of plates³, some pink, some grey, most for her upper teeth, but I think also, briefly, on her lower. One of them, I remember, had to be wound up to increase the pressure day by day, although I never saw it being done. Michael Griffiths was at the forefront of experimentation, it seems. In those days you would sometimes see people with grooves in their front teeth, allegedly as a result of over-enthusiastic orthodontic treatment, and so for my first plate Michael tried using elastic bands instead of wire. I disliked it, partly because of the taste of rubber (probably imaginary) but mainly because it was a fiddly job to fit the elastic band onto the plate each morning. The band used to ride up the teeth and press against the gums, making them sore and causing them to recede, but Michael was undaunted. He modified the plate so that it had a wire spur at the front, going between my front teeth and keeping the band in place. This was fine, provided I didn't touch my lip, as the least pressure would impale it on the wire attachment. Before long Michael admitted defeat and replaced this contraption with a conventional wire band.

The plate with its spur had one good consequence. One afternoon, having eaten a particularly disgusting school dinner, I was extensively sick in class. At the age I was then, ten years old, we were expected to be able to manage ourselves better than this, and Miss Stimpson was furious with me for not getting out of the room in time. I don't know why I didn't. I probably said it was because I had no warning, but I suspect it was rather that I kept hoping it wasn't going to happen, and was afraid of what Miss Stimpson would have said if I had rushed from the room and nothing had come of it. Anyway, what turned away her wrath was not anything I said in my defence, but

- 1 Michael and his wife Barbara were friends of the Eden-Greens, and once or twice when staying with my cousins I visited them in their flat. Younger than our parents, and childless, they seemed indefinably different from other adults we came across. I suppose they gave off a mild whiff of bohemianism. They were Aldermaston marchers.
- 2 Two or three of them were thought to be antiques because they had a rough sharp spot on the underside, whereas the others were smooth, suggesting a machine finish. They were, I think, sometimes described as Venetian, but I didn't think of them as anything but the special green glasses. I think any of the set that have survived are at Stamford now.
- 3 We called them plates and I didn't hear the term 'brace' until much later.

her horror when I took out my plate to clean it and she saw what a ghastly instrument of torture it was.⁴

Even after the rubber-band had been replaced I remained resistant to having a plate. My mother assumed that it was a simple matter, that I needed a plate to stop my teeth sticking out, but I forced her to give reasons. I'm not sure I accepted, completely, that my teeth did stick out. It wasn't a new idea. I had long been told that my sticking-out teeth meant that I breathed through my mouth, which was bad because I would 'get adenoids'. I had no idea what this meant. I associated it with my mother's stories about teaching in Deptford before the war, so it was presumably something associated with poor children. I knew that some people had their adenoids 'out' when they had their tonsils out. This happened to Tiggy, but the phrase was current in the family before her operation.⁵ There was plainly a lot at stake here, more than slightly protruding teeth, and I think I was aware of it. I had an answer to the adenoid argument, which was provided by one of the doctors I was taken to see by my mother (always anxious, and made more so by my 'accident', when I fell off the balcony and fractured my skull). He said that it was nonsense that I breathed through my mouth because of my teeth; it was the other way round, my teeth stuck out because I breathed through my mouth, and all I had to do was keep my mouth shut. He was Australian, and I remember him gently pinching my lips together. His remark seemed to me (but to no-one else) to be a trump card, although it wasn't until I was in my thirties and cycling along in the fumes of Newcastle buses that it occurred to me to try to keep my mouth shut while breathing.

One reason why I never accepted that my teeth (or Tiggy's, come to that) stuck out was that we knew someone whose teeth really did stick out, and I looked nothing like her. This was Mrs James, who lived a little way from us on Guibal Road. I remember what she looked like. My father described her as a 'round-headed Celt'⁶, which may have been true, although it struck me at the time as inexact, because her head clearly wasn't round like a football. Her teeth certainly did stick out; her mouth plainly had no room for them all. I don't recall whether anyone used the argument that unless my teeth were corrected I wouldn't be able to bite properly. If they had, I wouldn't have believed them, since you only had to look at Mrs James to see that she had no difficulty eating. I still regard orthodontic treatment (unless in some extreme circumstances that, in my ignorance, I've never yet come across) as a money-spinner for well-meaning dentists, like stimulating the phagocytes in *The Doctor's Dilemma*.

The would-be trump-card that my mother produced in our arguments was that if I didn't have my teeth straightened I would never get a girl-friend. I don't think she used this at first, perhaps not until I had started at big school. I think it is something that might have had more traction earlier. During my last year at Charlton Manor I was definitely interested in girls. I was interested in Ann Gosling, Sandra Crocombe and most emphatically in Jane Hall. They were the three that I sent Valentine cards to, the only time I have ever done such a thing. At the mildly orgiastic eleventh birthday party of Ian Poulter, the headmaster's son, I remember cuddling Jane with delight,

4 To complete this anecdote, I should mention that it is an early example of my compulsion for self-justification. I turned the incident over and over in my mind, and decided that the reason I stayed in my place was that if I tried to run from the room I would be sick exactly in the doorway, thus preventing the class from going out to play. My mother wrote a note to Miss Stimpson putting this defence. It's unlikely that in the moment of crisis I performed such a nice calculation. I may have persuaded myself after the event that I had done so, or perhaps I merely persuaded my mother.

5 We didn't refer to the tonsillectomy as an operation, probably because 'having your tonsils out' was a common idea. 'Having an operation' was something that tended to happen to adults, and was more serious. It's worth adding that Tiggy's spell in St Alphege's hospital, which I am mentioning so lightly, was quite horrific for her. We called it St Alfridges, as in Selfridges.

6 As opposed to her husband whom my father described as a 'long-headed Celt'. While Mrs James was dark, he was fair-haired, but I don't remember anything else about his appearance, except perhaps a rather straggly moustache. He was a major figure in the background of our childhood. The girls were threatened with being sent to him for coaching in arithmetic, but I don't know whether this ever happened. He was said to have a violent temper, and the story was that he had once kicked one of his sons through a window. Mrs James was the first person to read me *Hare Joins the Home Guard*. I believe they kept bees.

hugging her to me, burying my face in her white 'bollerow'. Did we kiss? I guess we did, but that is not what I remember.

In a school play Jane was the princess in *The Princess and the Pea*. As I was passing along the corridor I happened to see into the classroom where she was stripped to the waist as a teacher painted a massive bruise on her back. She was side on to the window and I saw her incipient breasts. I have never forgotten the sight, which I must have realised was somehow illicit, though I am sure it was unintended. It had never occurred to me before to wonder why girls and boys had different bathing costumes; it was just one of those meaningless binary splits that the world was full of. But I was aware that there was a staging problem over the princess showing her bruise, and people emphasised that only her back-view would be exposed. As for my sneak view of Jane through the classroom window, it certainly excited me, but it felt as though all the excitement came from seeing her back. This is not to say that her breasts didn't interest me. They did, but only because they contributed to a long-running debate in my mind over whether I had breasts. I knew that men had breasts, but that they were not really *breasts*, not in the real sense of the word. But I was of a physique which, when I went to Dulwich, would cause the gym master to call me Busty, and Tiggy and Jeffy had already drawn my attention to my bustiness. It struck me that Jane's breasts looked less pronounced than my own.

Interest in girls was something I had to keep secret at home, because I knew Jeffy and Tiggy would laugh at me for it. Avoiding being laughed at by them was probably the strongest motive in my life at that time. Jeffy helped with the Brownies and knew a girl from my class, Elizabeth Moore, and heard something about my activities. I may even have included Elizabeth in my Valentines list. The interest was something that crept up on me. It started, I think, because I had always preferred playing with girls, to avoid the rough and tumble, and humiliation, of football, and I was taken by surprise when it developed into the strange excitement of embracing Jane at the party. Jane's father was in the army and their house was said to have extensive grounds, though whether these belonged to the family or were part of War Department property I don't know. She invited many from the class to a party which promised to be exciting, but I refused the invitation, solely because I feared laughter at home if I went to a girl's party. It was bad enough that I had been driven to Ian Poulter's party by Sandra Crocombe's father (in a beige saloon car, unlike both the battered van-like thing that my parents owned, and the Eden-Green's large estate car). Jane refused to accept my excuses but I couldn't tell her the real reason. Our class was divided between the children of 'professional' people and the rest (no doubt there were further divisions among the rest) and I found that the professional children became increasingly hostile to me after the incident of Jane's party.

My interest in girls was something I didn't understand. I couldn't talk about it at home, and I refused to talk about it at school. I was aware that other boys in the class talked about girls. We went by coach to the Planetarium, and I remember that all the way a group of boys (John Foster, who was good at football, prominent among them) were looking out of the window and commenting on women's bosoms. It didn't occur to me that their interest was remotely connected with mine. I believed that no-one else had ever felt as I felt; I was unique. I don't remember what words the boys used to describe the object of their interest.

One of the arguments that my mother used to persuade me to go to Dulwich was that I would be at school on Saturdays and so would not be bothered by my sisters. She was burdened by the quarrels that so frequently broke out amongst us. I felt that the girls, together or singly, goaded me to lose my temper ('baiting' was the word my mother used) but it looked different to them. There were some real differences, over chores, for instance, since I resented having always to do the outdoor things, while Tiggy could do more interesting indoor things, like cooking. Recurrent quarrels also broke out between Jeffy and Tiggy. No doubt Mummy hoped that by removing me from the scene for most of Saturday she could reduce the tension. The upshot was that I felt intensely that in going to Dulwich I was entering a masculine world. My interest in girls was suspended, and so the argument that with sticking out teeth I would never get a girlfriend had no force. At that point I didn't want a girlfriend, any more than I wanted to learn about science or machines.

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Every so often over the next few years my parents would talk about 'sex rearing its ugly head'. They used it to explain moodiness and bad temper and other manifestations of 'adolescence', a word which they used with a mixture of distaste and amusement. At some point before I was fifteen my mother gave me a biology book by Cyril Bibby and hinted that I should learn from it what people called the facts of life. I was aware that this was a moment of some importance, but Tiggy spoke derisively of Cyril Bibby, which made me suspect I was not being told the whole story. I found the book boring; after all I was not a scientist, and I could never follow diagrams. It didn't occur to me to skip the stuff about plants and frogs, and I gave up long before I reached the section on human reproduction. None of this seemed to have anything to do with Jane and her bollerow, nor did it touch the world of fantasy-nudity that had occupied my imagination in early childhood, when I was six or seven. These fantasies had been subdued for a few years, and had then broken out again in my early teens. In the earlier period the reason for taking off our clothes was that we were in a steaming tropical jungle; later it was more to do with living in a bohemian milieu, surrounded by artists' models and the like.

By this time my orthodontic treatment had come to an end, whether successfully or not I could not tell. I certainly didn't look like Mrs James, but then I never had. Before long, however, my mother had another reason for threatening me with never getting a girlfriend: spots. I was a spotty youth, no question about that. Whether I'd have been less spotty if I had washed my face more regularly and more thoroughly I don't know. My mother gave me very little guidance on what we now call personal hygiene, and of course my father gave none at all. It was only by accidentally overhearing boys at school talking about it that I discovered, at the age of fifteen, that many people washed their hair more than once a month. My idea of a bath was to lie in it, reading or listening to the wireless⁷, until the water got cold and then to get out and stand about until dry. Instead of giving advice on washing, my mother recommended ointments. She took note that my French pen-friend Jacques had a preparation that he applied to his spots. I had observed boys at school who used a pinkish brown preparation. I didn't fancy it.

Shortly before my father left for America in September 1962 (I was just fifteen) he came up to my room while I was doing my homework and after some show of awkwardness asked me if I had wet dreams (he must have known the answer). I had never heard the term, but guessed its meaning and said yes. He said I shouldn't feel guilty about it as it was quite natural. And that was that. He didn't ask, and I didn't say, how frequent the wet dreams were nor whether I actively provoked them. As a result, when I came to think over what he had said, I didn't know whether the absolution he had given actually applied to my case, since I regularly provoked these dreams night after night. Was that quite natural? I wondered.

On his final evening before his journey, we were all sitting rather gloomily in the blue room – our parents, my sisters and me. Probably my mother thought the solemnity of the occasion demanded the use of our best room, which we seldom used except when we had visitors. I don't know what we talked about, except that at one point my mother brought up my spots. She was still trying to persuade me to use an ointment, and may have seen this emotional moment as a good opportunity to force her point home. 'What are we to do about his spots?' she said. Silence. 'I have spots now,' I said at last, 'but soon I shall start shaving and they will go away.' My father laughed heartily at this, and said it was a good answer. Thwarted for the moment, my mother did not give up in the weeks that followed, and eventually she persuaded me to go to the doctor to get some ointment on prescription. The surgery was very busy and the doctor looked exhausted (this must have been very apparent if I noticed it). I felt guilty to be bothering her for something that wasn't an illness. I didn't use the ointment very regularly.

It was not that I was indifferent to the threat of never getting a girl-friend, rather that I was aware that of all the obstacles in my way, spots were the least important. So what were the obstacles? Shyness was one problem, a particular form of shyness which was really the old fear of being found out and laughed at by my elder sisters. Another block was due to the intensity and vividness of my

⁷ Listening to the wireless was not an option until my parents came back from America and gave me a transistor radio. I would usually listen to the ten o'clock news programme, but I also recall weekly readings from Dante.

sexual fantasies: I knew that no girlfriend I might have now would live up to my dreams. Those things were for adults, and what was on offer to me was the usual feeble and provisional imitation of adult life. I came to hate the word adolescent. But still, I made two half-hearted attempts to get a girlfriend.

The first was Alison Finch. Her father, Joe Finch, was a communist and my parents knew him and his wife (who was not a communist, but a Catholic) through Donald Brown. I suspect my mother and Mrs Finch were discussing their clever offspring and thought what a good idea it would be if we got together.⁸ One day, therefore, I was invited to go with Joe and Alison to see Jean Anouilh's *La Répétition* at the Bromley Little Theatre. I don't remember much about the play, except I think it was about discreet aristocratic adultery. Joe had evidently not known this, and on the way home he tried to give a Marxist interpretation, claiming (falsely I think) that Anouilh was a communist – he may have been thinking of Louis Aragon. This led to further theatrical outings for Alison and me. We went to *The Bacchae* at the Mermaid Theatre, which involved a long walk from London Bridge station, about which Alison complained, although I enjoyed it as providing a few minutes of intimacy. On the way back I think I may have taken her arm. She was wearing a red coat, and shoes that made walking uncomfortable. On another occasion we went to something at the Aldwych. Alison had her cousin from Ireland (a girl called Finn) staying with her, and she suggested that I should find another boy to make it a foursome. This was not what I wanted, partly because I wanted to be alone with her, but mainly because it would involve me in admitting to someone at school that I was going out with a girl, even if as yet I couldn't claim that this was so in the full sense of the phrase *going out*. In the event Tony Wills accepted the role of the other boy, and the thing passed off without too much awkwardness, but I found the whole thing so embarrassing that I have no recollection of what it was we went to see.

I don't remember the sequence of events in this affair. At some point we went together to a meeting of a CND youth group at Charlton House. The proceedings were dominated by Young Communists, so Alison may have found them more comprehensible than I did.⁹ On the way home we had a ridiculous argument about the Common Market, which I thought vaguely might be a good thing (I was keen on the Liberals in those days), but which Alison opposed, knowledgeably and according to the Party line. I had such a strong feeling that she was fed up with my company that I went inside when we reached our house, leaving her to walk on home to Wricklemarsh Road on her own. I felt disgusted with her, with myself, and with the YCND. One of my sisters told me I had done wrong in not accompanying Alison to her door, which of course I knew well enough without being told, but I defended myself (aloud or in my own mind, I can't now remember) on the irrelevant grounds that the evening was still light and the streets were safe.

It was in November 1963¹⁰ that this unsatisfactory affair came to an end. Alison and I went to see *West Side Story* at the Gaumont in Lewisham, and the following Saturday she invited me to her house to hear the music on an LP. I must have been quite pleased at this invitation, because I remember not being upset at my sisters' jocular references to my having a date. Alison suggested that I should bring round my LP of *That Was the Week That Was*. She had Beatles records, which

8 Parental intervention didn't come to anything in this case, but I should be ungrateful if I didn't mention that on another occasion it had an effect of lifelong importance: it was after a similar conversation between my mother and Bessie Barker that Bernard and I made contact with each other.

9 One of the leading figures was someone I recognised from primary school days, a boy called (I think) Donald Scott. At Charlton Manor he had worn National Health spectacles and a hearing aid, and he was teased and bullied. He was never in my class, so I didn't know him or take active part in the bullying, but I remember him from the playground. At one time he took to carrying a stick and brandishing it at his tormentors. I remember how he would turn round, shake his stick, and shout. When he reappeared in the Youth CND he was wearing Buddy Holly specs and I don't remember noticing the hearing aid. I had the feeling that he recognised me but didn't feel it worth his while to acknowledge me.

10 I can date this because I remember that the edition of *TW3* that we watched was devoted entirely to celebrating the life and mourning the death of President Kennedy. And very boring we thought it was.

she played as well, and which I found baffling. We sat side by side on the sofa. Her parents were away at a conference, and her younger brother was told firmly to leave us alone. At the conclusion of the evening we watched *That Was the Week That Was*, and then I went home, leaving her my LP, but feeling I had both failed a test and missed an opportunity. Weeks and months passed and I revolved these things in my mind. It must have been in the spring that I rang her up to suggest going out. She said she was too busy. I left it at that.

We met just once more. After Mrs Colley's death in (I think) 1966 Anna and I called on Martin, and while we were there Alison also came round, with her cousin Finn, on a visit of condolence. It was a fairly awkward encounter, and I'm afraid what I particularly recall is noticing that Alison's breasts were more prominent than they had been when I had last seen her two or three years before.

I have only the haziest recollection of what Alison looked like – she was small and dark with short hair – but I have never been able to forget her. This is not because of any deep feelings I had for her, but because of odd connections and things that have cropped up over the years to remind me of her. Her presence in the background started before I ever met her. Although my sisters had both left Blackheath High School by then, my mother still had contacts there, and Alison was known from an early age as one of the cleverest girls the school had seen. Her father was also a known figure in my parents' circle. More oddly, a boy I used to speak to on the 108 bus was a pupil at a Catholic school where his mother and Alison's mother both taught. He therefore knew of Alison not as the daughter of a communist but as the daughter of a Catholic. Bernard came across her at Cambridge, and once described how she had declared her unswerving loyalty to Marxism-Leninism. I never knew how these competing influences played themselves out in her mental development – there was also presumably a secular Jewish heritage from her father. She went on to become a distinguished scholar, a specialist in Proust, I believe, and it was as a result of this that she popped up again in a most unlikely way. Anna's friend Christine Crow mentioned that she was going to see Alison and her husband (also an authority on French literature) and I recalled having known her and having lent her a record of *That Was the Week That Was*. To my surprise, after her next visit to Cambridge Christine handed over the record, which had evidently remained in Alison's collection for some thirty years.¹¹ I had the impression that Alison just about remembered who I was. Probably what she recalled most vividly was that I had spots.

I was hit quite hard by Alison's rejection of me in the spring of 1964. She presumably thought I had a cheek, ringing up expecting her to come out after such a long interval of silence and neglect, although as I saw it I had not been neglecting her but thinking of her all the time. I was upset. I remember walking in the garden, listening in my head again and again to her calm refusal. I told no-one what had happened, but started on my first novel, a story of a faithless girl and her doggedly faithful lover, with its title taken from a mournful folk-song about the transience of love. It occurs to me now that all this may well have contributed to the depression which led to my refusal to go on at school.

My second attempt to get a girlfriend came after I left school, while I was working at the GTTR. Once more my mother's hidden hand was involved. A woman she knew, possibly through working for Oxfam, was a woman on her own with a daughter of about sixteen called Caroline, also at Blackheath High School. I met the mother and daughter once or twice in the Oxfam shop in the Old Dover Road, where I worked on Saturday afternoons, and somehow arranged to take Caroline to a film at the National Film Theatre (at that time still using the cinema in Millbank Tower). We went to see *The Fallen Idol* and possibly *Brighton Rock*. We went to other things as well, and there must have been some more coming and going, and my sister and brother-in-law met her. Martin commented that she had rather thick legs. Once more I have only the vaguest memory of what she looked like. She was quite a heavy girl, I think, with a nice face and a sweet smile. I suspect she was shyer than me, which was probably why our mothers thought we should get together. After a month or so I wrote letters declaring passionate devotion, and she asked me to stop, which I did.

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11 I played it once; it wasn't funny .

There is one other friendship that I should mention, with Sheila Hanley¹², although it was only my brother-in-law who regarded Sheila as my girlfriend, making jocular remarks about my liking the older woman. She was the receptionist at the GTTR. My sister Jennifer worked there (and indeed wangled me the job) and Sheila had great admiration for her, which meant that she was well disposed towards me from the start. She was always very kind, gave me books, passed on theatre tickets and encouraged my interest in the cinema. The only drawback was her constant and exaggerated praise. She could be touchy and would take offence, but even then she would combine it with some remark about my extraordinary intelligence and amazing destiny. I found this embarrassing and didn't know how to deal with it, but I was always grateful to anyone who was kind to me and took me seriously. Although I have never known Sheila's age, Martin was clearly right in saying she was older than me. Her build and her face struck me, I think, as masculine and she had a loud, deep voice. She wore arresting make-up. Her clothes were colourful but not bright, and although they were unambiguously feminine they made her seem hard and severe. We went to the theatre together once or twice, and as we walked back to the hostel where she stayed I would wonder whether she wanted me to kiss her goodnight. The conclusion I came to was that one reason Sheila liked me was that I was someone she could trust not to make sexual advances. For my part, although my liking for her may have had its origins in her willingness to accept my superior destiny, it survived and grew with my admiration for her as a proud, strong woman who made a life for herself against considerable practical difficulties.

When, spots and all, I fell in love with Anna and she with me, Sheila was one of the first people I told. I told her even before the day in October 1965 that Anna and I spent wandering around London and making up our minds to marry. She was delighted, she said, prepared, as always, to take me seriously. I doubt if she thought for a minute that Anna and I would remain in love long enough to get married. Her real feeling was probably much the same as Mrs Denny's: how interesting to watch and see how this unlikely affair works itself out.

By this time my parents had sold the Blackheath house and moved to Farnham. They stayed with friends while their Mount Pleasant house was undergoing repairs, so I didn't visit them until after the October day. I don't know what my parents' feeling towards me was. I was working in London, living again with Mrs Denny. Jeffy had moved away, so I was no longer working with her, but was on my own. I thought I had cut myself loose from the family. Not true, of course. I thought they had washed their hands of me, which I now know was not true – although it is unwise to assume that they felt the same as I have felt for our adolescent and adult children. Their lives while we were growing up were more varied, more dramatic, more multifarious than mine has ever been. There was a little bit of truth in the cutting loose and washing hands.

I remember standing beside my mother at the kitchen sink in the Mount Pleasant house. 'You know you said I would never get a girlfriend?' I said. 'Well, I'm engaged to be married.'

In my recollection of the scene my mother is smoking, but I wonder if it is true. She may possibly have given up by then. It may be that from long association of ideas I assume that when at the sink she would have a cigarette in her mouth. I remember what I said, but not the exact words, nor what she replied nor how she looked nor what she might have felt.

I was happy, but not particularly triumphant at having proved my mother wrong. And in any case, she wasn't really wrong. I never did get a girlfriend, because I never regarded Anna as a girlfriend. But the problem was deeper than my teeth or my spots and greasy hair, although they can't have helped. Girlfriends are for playing, and I never learned to play and pretend. In the game of make-believe love there are rules and limits which I never learned, skills that remained forever beyond me, and, I suppose, pleasures which I never tasted.

¹² Sheila died this year (2013).