

Laughter in the Light – Henry Miller in Barcelona

Matthew Tree

When Henry Miller stopped off in Barcelona in late April of 1953, during a European tour, he was in a situation both enviable and depressing. Although, at age 62, he had long been acclaimed by many fellow writers – and some literary critics – around the world as one of the 20th century's most important living authors, the books on which this reputation rested (*Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, *Sexus and Plexus*) could not be published in any English-speaking country.

The censors, prudes to a man (none were women), objected strongly to Miller's strong language. In Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Japan, though, these same books were freely available in translation; and in France, and France alone, the unexpurgated English versions had been on the open market since Miller wrote them (in Paris, in the 1930s) thanks to a curious loophole in Gallic law, which at that time banned all obscene books as long as they were in French, giving other, presumably less serious, languages a free erotic rein. In Britain and the US, his readers had to make do with that handful of his titles which were unsullied by rude words and ruder episodes, such as the collection of essays *The Cosmological Eye* (New York, 1939) or his chaste book about Greece, *The Colossus of Maroussi*, which sold 50,000 copies in the UK alone, when published in 1950.

Miller lived in California – in a shack on Big Sur – and his European and Japanese royalties were arriving infrequently, irregularly and in quantities too small to live on. Especially complicated was the situation with the French royalties, which had been accumulating considerably over the years, but which were unavailable to Miller due to currency export restrictions. His friend Lawrence Durrell had urged him to buy somewhere in France and move there, before the French government devalued the franc, an imminent economic measure which would have wiped out Miller's small French fortune. That was one reason for Miller's trip to Europe in the early 1950s; the other being that most of his closest friends – whom he had not seen since his Paris days – lived there. On top of which he had just separated from his third wife and started up a relationship with the woman who would end up being his fourth: Eve McClure, a young, long time admirer of his work. So

the European trip, which was to last seven months, also became a kind of extended honeymoon.

The first stop, unsurprisingly, was Paris, the city in which Miller had found his written voice twenty years earlier. After hob-nobbing it with the painter Fernand Léger and the photographers Man Ray and Brassäi – and having been greeted with a flurry of enthusiastic articles about his work in the French Press – Henry and Eve moved on to Brussels, which neither of them had visited before (Miller, having observed the Belgians for a few days, concluded they were ‘neither fish nor fowl, more like potato balls’). They then crossed the French Midi and drove into Spain, where Miller had one overriding objective: to meet up with his oldest and closest friend, Alfred Perlès, in Barcelona, after a separation of thirteen years.

Alfred Perlès was an Austrian-born writer (his parents were Czech Jews) who Miller had briefly met during an exploratory visit to Paris in 1928. Two years later, Miller had settled in Paris without a penny to his name, and was sitting one day on the terrace of the Dôme café, drinking brandy after brandy in order to drum up enough Dutch courage to tell the waiter he couldn't pay for them, when Perlès came across him quite by chance, settled the bill, and invited him to move into his rented flat (Perlès, unlike Miller, had an income, being a proof-reader for the Paris edition of the *Herald Tribune*). Together with the young Lawrence Durrell and Anaïs Nin, Perlès would form part of Miller's Parisian inner circle in the years 1930 to 1938.

This was the period that saw the publication of much of Miller's finest autobiographical work, in some of which – *Tropic of Cancer* and *Quiet Days In Clichy* – Perlès himself plays a prominent part (under the pseudonym 'Carl'). Their close friendship was to last until Miller's death in 1980, but went through its shakiest patch precisely in the years before the reunion in Barcelona. Since the 1930s, Perlès had renounced his anarchistic and pacifist views, had moved to England, married, settled down (in Wells, in the county of Somerset) and had enlisted in the British Army during the Second World War. Miller saw this as a kind of betrayal of what he saw as Perlès's true self, or, at the very least, as a completely inexplicable change in his old friend. Throughout much of the '40s, then, they had kept a certain distance from each other.

In Miller's description of their Barcelona rendezvous, *Reunion in Barcelona* (finally published in London in a limited edition of 500 copies, in 1959), the author is at pains to stress that all that distance-keeping had been

quite unnecessary and that he was relieved and indeed overjoyed to find that Perlès hadn't changed one bit. This is the persistent, laudatory leitmotif of the entire 40-page text, written in the form of a long letter to Perlès. In *Reunion*, Miller lays on the praise with an unusually large trowel: Perlès is described as Miller's 'Saviour', a 'true Master', belonging to an order of 'emancipated beings'. For 48 hours, Miller says, they laughed and laughed in Barcelona, but, he assures Perlès: 'I laughed not as a man does who is happy to find an old friend, a copain, a fond scallywag, I laughed as a man would laugh who suddenly met a messenger of the gods bringing him on a platter the most vivid, detailed memories of all the golden days of his life.'

Later in the text, Perlès is transformed into 'a playful dolphin...or should I say: a celestial porpoise?'. No wonder that Perlès, in his reply to *Reunion in Barcelona* (*Reunion in Big Sur*, also published in London in 1959), mildly berates Miller for 'the generous, albeit inflated portrait you gave of me, far too generous, in fact, to be taken without a pinch of salt by someone who knows myself as well as I do.'

Aside from all this acclamation of Perlès, *Reunion in Barcelona* also contains some revealing comments about Miller's ambivalence about his life in the States since 1940. America, for Miller, is '... an alien world. And I mean an alien world.' He describes himself staring at a magnificent view of the Pacific and wishing it were the Mediterranean.

The piece ends with a humorous swipe at England, a country Miller loathed, but visited a few weeks after he did Barcelona, in order to see how Perlès was getting on in his adopted habitat. Miller's opinion of the UK remained much as it always had been: of a visit to a pub, for example, he writes, 'Even if it seemed a bit like going to chapel, even if the beer and ale were detestable (to my taste), even if the talk that went on smacked of dementia, the warm, cosy, intimate air of the pub was definitely most agreeable.' Faint praise was never so damning.

Curiously, the one element that is all but absent from *Reunion in Barcelona* is Barcelona itself. Miller stayed in a pensió on the Carrer del Carme, a few doors up from the fabric shop – still there – called El Indio. The city he saw for a brief two days was the drab, neglected, permanently muzzled Barcelona of the early 1950s, described so accurately by Víctor Mora in his novel *Els plàtans de Barcelona* (Barcelona, 1966): a poverty-stricken place whose identity had been snuffed out for years by Franco's

dictatorship. Apparently oblivious to this political situation, Miller notes his disappointment that it was not the 'Spanish city' he had 'dreamed it would be', and adds: 'Barcelona impressed me as a hodgepodge of Brooklyn and Brussels.' And we already know what he thought about Brussels.

In *Reunion in Barcelona*, indeed, the city is nothing so much as an invisible backdrop to his and Perlès's endless laughter as they recall the good old Parisian days. There would, perhaps, be nothing exceptional about this, if Miller hadn't had quite a bit more knowledge than most casual visitors about Barcelona and even Catalonia, having had an intense ten-year affair with Anaïs Nin, who not only spoke fluent Catalan and knew Barcelona well, but whose father, the pianist Joaquim Nin, had been a personal friend of Jacint Verdaguer (as Nin mentions in one of her letters to Miller, in which Verdaguer is described as 'a great Catalonian poet'). Despite this, there is no mention – or awareness – of Barcelona being a Catalan city. (Indeed, Miller didn't seem to notice the existence of the Catalans at all until he was translated into their native language in the mid '70s; it was then that, in a comment on the Spanish transition to democracy, he wrote the following to his translator, Jordi Arbonès: 'I see the Basques and Catalans are giving the Spaniards a hard time, eh?')

After Barcelona, Miller moved on to Toledo, writing to Lawrence Durrell that he had 'met Fred and Anne [Perlès's wife] in Barcelona and had full two days with them. Fred was just as always – even more so...We laughed from the time we met...Haven't laughed that way in many a year.'

That, indeed, is *Reunion in Barcelona* in a nutshell: a meeting in a little-known city between two writers who, according to their own accounts, spent the best part of their time laughing their heads off. Having said that, grim though the Catalan capital must have been in 1953, I can't help suspecting that if this meeting had been in, say, Brussels or Brooklyn, they wouldn't have felt quite so free to laugh quite so much. Barcelona, at least, is on the Mediterranean.

Pere Quart

Song

The spoken silences
and secret music
flood my room.
 The tide is rising.

Life longs to savour dreams,
like an infant behind bars.
In the sunlit night
 I sail on, swiftly.

I am storybook shipwrecked,
and make for the desert island.
The palm trees on the shore
 barely sway.

My thirst re-ingnites
in a black water spring;
the shadows are not golden,
 the beach is tainted.

Sleeping, I fall asleep
and await the full moon:
upwards it flies, waning
 a scythe or dagger.

Life longs to savour the dream,
in the storybook shipwreck,
the islands are not golden.
 It was all a lie.

Cançó

Els silencis en veu alta
i la musica secreta
inunden la meva cambra.
Puja la marea.

La vida vol tastar els somnis
com un infant entre reixes.
En la nit assolellada
navego de pressa.

He naufragat a l'antiga
nedo vers l'illa deserta.
Les palmeres de la riba
es bressen a penes.

La meva set es revifa
en una font d'aigua negra;
les ombres no són daurades,
la plataja bruteja.

En la dormida m'adormo
i espero la lluna plena:
vola, cel amunt, minvada
dalla o ganiveta.

La vida vol tastar el somni,
he naufragat a l'antiga,
les illes no són daurades.
Tot era mentida.

Translated by Ryan Chandler from *Obra*, Barcelona: Fontanella 1963.
One of Catalonia's most acclaimed poets, Pere Quart is the pen name of
Joan Oliver, 1899-1986.

Making Dance with Fruit

Haarlson Phillips

He was a glutton for fruit and he smoked black tobacco. He carried the aroma of gunpowder tea tinted with orange. He used soft fruit as a kind of clock; as a means of positioning his work in the flow of time.

‘You can never step into the same river twice,’ he told me more than once.

Depending on the season, he would set a bowl of apricots, peaches, tomatoes, cherries or berries on a stool in the studio and work on a piece for the duration of the fruits’ edibility. When the fruit began to rot he would wrap and add the piece to his portfolio or, if dissatisfied with his efforts, obliterate it, replace the fruit with a fresh bowl, and start over.

They said in Madrid, ‘he made shoes talk’; in Barcelona, he eschewed footwear and set about making sinews sing.

It was my job to ensure he had everything he needed to do his job.

His initial demands were fairly modest: a well-lit, air-conditioned room with a sprung floor; a cd player; a metronome; plain paper; notation paper; pencils; highlighters, and coloured gaffa tape for marking the floor. But, as work on a piece progressed, his demands became more wilful and capricious: ‘I need six copies of Zaragazano’s Almanac by four-thirty this afternoon.’

In the early, exploratory days of making a piece he encouraged me to sit in, be on hand should he need the air-conditioning or lighting adjusting, or sometimes help with peeling an awkward orange. But mostly he used me as a polite doorman; barring all intrusions to the space.

One morning, as I sat by the door watching his dancers begin class, he handed me a polythene sandwich-box containing all the dancers’ mobile phones.

‘Here,’ he said.

I took the box and, without explanation, he slipped me a shopping-list, and I took myself off to Concepción market to buy his afternoon ration of fruit.

Over time his daily lists took me to places I never knew existed, and would normally never have need to visit: cavernous fabric shops; lavender scented hat shops; curiously shadowed magic shops; and a curative herb

shop, stacked high with antique porcelain storage jars.

On good days, wandering dreamlike through the streets, I indulged a notion he was making a work on me; dancing me across the city. On bad days, when no-one had anything he'd demanded, I felt he'd knowingly sent me to fetch a pail of tartan paint.

He once sent me out for a pack of tarot cards.

'Classic design,' he said, taking a bite on an apple. 'Tough, well laminated.'

They were tough, but they weren't good enough.

'What use are these? I can't read them.' He split the pack and tossed the cards over his shoulder. 'Bring me a reader.'

Without a word – but noting only The Fool and The Tower lay face up – I turned on my heel, walked out onto the street, and set off in search of a tarot card reader. Not so difficult a task in Barcelona.

In much the same way as good music is defined by the rests, by the silences between notes, dance, like sculpture, succeeds when it defines, or re-defines, the space around it.

He could have, and should have, been a pioneer – he carved and positioned space as easily as breathing – but he had no interest in simple applause. He worked to create atmospheres of possibility; spaces wherein he hoped we, his audience, would make more space happen.

'It is given we all want more space in our lives. But when we have space we don't know what to do with it, except fill it with rubbish. Why are we all so frightened of space? Space offers possibility, but for many, space equals emptiness.'

During my time with him I learned that creating dance is a form of alchemy; an empty space, some time, a will to create, and at least one living body, are the basic and essential ingredients. Anything and everything else, including trained dancers and music or noise, are not essential to the making of dance.

I've experienced attempts at dance with inanimate objects, and I've experienced attempts at dance with light, with water, with fire, with coloured balloons and kites in the sky: all puppetry, not dance.

Dance is lending a living body an intended sense of loaded movement. It can be the blink of an eye, the nuanced twitch of a nostril as a dancer pulls breath during the beat after a leap or a lift. It can be subtle, ephemeral, so fleeting it would require an astrophysical device to measure its impact. And

it can be brutish heavy, like a bucket of hot lead falling through the skylight of a maternity ward.

To realise a dance piece is to ride a rising escalator of hope and fear. The hope is that a moment, or, better, a series of moments, will emerge from the fog of physical, mental and emotional activity. This unplanned, emergent moment will transform murky clouds of meandering metaphorical puffery into a clean, clear blue sky of cogent, sincere expression.

The fear is of becoming trapped in a state of emotional inertia; that the body will fail to connect with, and interpret, the impulse for movement.

He worked through these intense moment-seeking periods chomping on fruit and smoking Ducados right to the nail.

‘Up, up, up,’ he chivvied, cupping a half-orange in one hand, a cigarette in the other. ‘Inhale the space! Drink the air! Breathe proud! Stand loud!’ And he pushed, pulled and bounced his dancers around, urging them to stretch, bend, rip and mend the air between them.

I knew he was having trouble finding moments because my errands became increasingly erratic; he began to send me to collect not just fruit and props but ideas as well.

‘Freud’s 150th birthday next year,’ he announced one morning as he took his regular eleven o’clock cortado at the café-bar next door to the studio. ‘I have a feeling I may want to incorporate, make physical, some of his ideas in a piece. What do you think?’

I shrugged. I knew from experience it didn’t matter what I thought. I sensed an errand in the making.

‘I don’t have time to read.’ He pulled a long drag on his cigarette. ‘Bring me a ten-minute presentation for tomorrow morning, to share with our cast. Something bright, something sharp. An encapsulation of his core thesis.’

‘No,’ I said. I’ve no idea where it came from, it erupted, unbidden, like a belch.

He cast me a look; soft, quizzical, slightly pitying, as if questioning my sanity.

‘No?’ He focussed his eyes on mine; cigarette smoke curling a wispy veil across his features. ‘Why no?’

‘Freud doesn’t deserve your attention.’

He dropped his gaze to the counter as if consulting his coffee. ‘And who’ he asked, ‘is worthy, or deserving enough, of my attention?’

And I still don't know why I said it, it slipped out, unbeckoned, like a silent fart. 'Einstein.'

He nodded, stubbed his cigarette in an ashtray, raised his eyes to gaze along the mirrored shelf of spirits, pursed his lips, and nodded again.

'OK. There it is. Bring me Einstein.'

I expected him to rail, to rant, face down my temerity. Instead, I landed myself with an impossible task and another hastily scrawled shopping-list.

The following morning, as I prepared to give my presentation to his less-than-wholly attentive young dancers, he ceremoniously sliced a large melon into thick wedges and set them on a platter on a stool.

His dancers arranged themselves in a tangle on the floor at my feet; they smelled like primary school kids.

I cleared my throat and opened up a flipchart pad to reveal a hurriedly squiggled bright yellow sun, and they smiled like primary school kids.

He sat there, high on a stool behind his dancers, nodding along with my stumbling explication, chomping on nectarines.

'And so, T1 is the point from which our imaginary observer notes the movement of Earth through space.' My hands quivered as I made marks on the flipchart. 'But all points in this space are moving. And the velocity of light is the same regardless of whether the source of light is moving or still.' I felt as if skating with a bellyful of brandy.

He knew I was struggling, but I knew I had animated his interest. As I drew circles supposedly moving through space along an axis, he plotted an arrangement of fruits on the studio floor.

He placed a line of five lemons, intersecting a cluster of oranges arranged in a crescent. He scattered individual grapes, cherries and tomatoes.

Having created a three-metre-diameter circle with bright green limes, he summoned his dancers' attention.

His dancers looked relieved.

I folded the flipchart easel and retreated to a corner of the studio.

He marched them through a strenuous ten-minute warm-up before clapping them away, like birds, into a flurry of improvised movement.

His six young dancers played a spindizzy game of catch with fruit, dashing about the space, effortlessly scooping pieces of fruit from the floor and tossing them through the air.

Haroun, a lithe Moroccan, leapt into a pirouette, arms outstretched,

and released two tangerines. Silvia dived backwards through the air, caught both tangerines, hit the floor, rolled a perfect reverse somersault and tossed them back into the air. David plucked the fruit from the air, as if catching raindrops, and rolled into a clenched fist cartwheel, releasing the fruit at the apex of his tumbling arc, allowing Montsy – palms held in front of her like a supplicant – to gather them, drop to her knees as if before an altar, and roll the fruit across the space to Nuria.

This furious display of energy lasted one minute, then, in perfect unison, five of the dancers seated themselves in a line on the floor to watch Ruth juggle with four grapes. Responding to an unseen and unheard prompt, Ruth pulled her arms into her sides, stood to attention, and allowed the grapes to fall to the floor.

I scanned the space and noted that apart from the four grapes, all the fruit had been replaced in precisely the same configuration as he had set them out.

Agog, I realised I had witnessed an intuitive, athletic rendering of Brownian motion. A stunning collection of moments.

This brief, virtuoso display lifted morale, unlocking myriad possibilities; and from that point rehearsals rushed by as a blur.

After fifteen days of search and reflect, trial, test and experiment he stitched together a stand-alone four minute thirty-three second piece, what he termed a *divertissement*; a thirty-second duet; a muscular one-minute solo for Haroun, and a thirty-six minute piece comprised of eight sections.

When I reconciled the pre-production budget I calculated we'd gone through seventy-five kilos of fruit.

I never did find what he did with the pips, seeds, stalks, and inedible bits.

His attitude to music surprised me. I expected him to be much more discerning and more demanding.

I considered having a composer a luxury – even though, unbelievably, cheaper than the performance rights for his first-choice recorded music.

He listened to snatches of the composer's best efforts with cold indifference, all the while eating bananas, refusing to give notes or express approval.

It amused him to watch me second-guess his thinking and persuade Roger, the composer, to not flounce off the job.

He was much more engaged with the lighting design.

‘This is not cinema,’ was his over-riding injunction. ‘Give me cool. Give me warm. Give me hot. Give me light I can feel.’

Sharings – post-dress pre-public peer assessments – are always fraught, if convivial, affairs; juggling apprehension and the joy of meeting up with old friends. There’s always booze and food.

The dancers had secretly taken the initiative to lay on a spread of fruit platters, a variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic sangrias, clericos and fruit punches and a very able coctelero to mash mojitos, caipirinhas, caipiroskas and whisky fruit sours.

They also conspired with twenty or more of their peers to attend all garbed à la Carmen Miranda.

He got the joke. When he entered the showing space, dressed wholly in black, and saw the tables of fruit arranged like market-stalls, he smiled, and all assembled cheered and clapped.

After ten blurred, nervous minutes of gladhanding, the audience settled to their places, and I removed myself to the wings.

Audience lights to black. Go time. And Ruth stood there, visibly trembling. I nudged her gently and she uncoiled like a spring, diving into centre stage.

Not one missed cue, not a stumble, not a breath out of place.

The pieces fascinated even the most cynical eye and, like gravity, possessed an irresistible pull. I could tell by the profundity of intrigued silence between sections that his audience had become acutely, electrically, aware of their immediate individual exterior space, the proximity of the person next to them and the space between.

He had opened up possibility. All we had to do was connect.

The overall effect of experiencing his work was of being in time, wefted into its flow, passing through life; deep-seam soul mining.

The show closed to three seconds’ silence followed by the most enraptured applause I’ve ever experienced.

After that I don’t know precisely what happened. I was pre-occupied with tidying things backstage, fiddling around, delaying my joining the throng, when I heard someone call above the din, ‘Give him room! Give him space! Give him air!’

I ran onto the stage and looked into the makeshift auditorium to see him laid flat on his back, a cigarette still burning in his left hand, his right hand clutched around his throat.

His lips were blue.

‘He was laughing,’ someone said. ‘Laughing, drinking, smoking. Then he took a bite of pineapple, and then he started dancing.’

Carles Riba

Poetry?

You should seek it you know where
it exists, like grace
or the pure hard water
of a woodland spring.

¿La poesia?

Cal cercar-la on tu saps ja
que és, com La Gràcia
o l'aigua pura i dura
d'una font emboscada.

Carles Riba i Bracons (23 September 1893 - 1959) was a Catalan poet. He wrote works including *Estances* (1919 and 1930), *Salvatge Cor* (1952), *Del joc i del foc* (1947), and *Esbós per a tres oratoris* (1957)

See you in a mo (Manchester Barcelona Manchester)

Jeff King

I spent the first nineteen years of my life living under the same roof as my father, but it would be misleading to claim we spent much real time together; and when I say real time I mean real time, not the so-called ‘quality time’ of more recent vintage from the family bonding menu. On the rare occasions that I did coincide in the same room as my elusive progenitor he would barely register my presence, glued as he invariably was to the living room sofa whilst tackling one stage or another of sleep: dozing off; cat napping; full-blooded snoozing; or waking up. Begrudgingly if it was the latter. If he wasn’t asleep, he was on his way out of the house. ‘See you in a mo,’ was his stock greeting accompanied by a slightly bewildered expression when he bumped into me, his only child, though as a rule it was a false assertion. Unless you calculate moments in hours or days.

A boilermaker by trade, dad worked at the British Railways works in Crewe, a thirty-minute drive from our house in Manchester. Monday to Friday he would leave home at six in the morning, a full two hours before my mother rallied me to get ready for school. I would return home at five every afternoon and go straight to my room to do homework, or as I grew older and school became an inconvenient parenthesis interrupting my real life, to listen to Tamla Motown records on my sky-blue Dansette. At the time I wondered how come a devout United man like dad had bought me a record player in City colours. In retrospect, it’s obvious. The Dansette was second-hand and money was too tight to mention.

Dad would get home from work about half past five, by which time mum would have his tea waiting for him in the living room. I would go downstairs, nod hello and then we’d eat together with little in the way of conversation beyond ‘Right pissed down on way home,’ or ‘Pass the salt, lad’. Dad always had his tea on his lap, though he never used a tray, just a folded copy of the Daily Mirror. His was the prime spot on our threadbare but comfy settee opposite a huge teak cabinet which filled the living room like an occupying army. Our telly, or to be more accurate, Radio Rentals’ telly, sat atop the dark wooden occupier, looking apologetically small and consumptive by comparison, even when the aerial wasn’t on the blink and

the picture more oblique than the musings of an abstract expressionist. My daily lot was exile on a stiff-backed dining chair at an awkward angle to the screen. Five minutes of craning my neck to follow Granada News or Lift Off with Ayshea was guaranteed to give me a cricked neck. If truth be told, there was plenty of room next to dad on the three-piece, but mum, who was a stickler for 'proper manners', insisted I sat at our fold-out Formica table to eat. 'Like in proper families, like.' In my mother's book, 'proper' was up there with 'royal' when it came to adjectives which demanded deferential, almost hushed tones.

Within ten minutes of finishing his tea – faggots was a thrice-weekly staple – dad would drift off, mouth open, blobs of saliva meandering from the corners of his mouth. Beauty sleep it wasn't. As his lower jaw dropped, so too would the Mirror, slipping gradually out of his calloused hands onto the carpet, from where I would eagerly retrieve it and read it cover to cover, starting, in a habit I will take with me to the grave, at the back with the sports pages. About half past seven, my mum - after eating tea on her own in the kitchen, doing the dishes, and preparing our packed lunches for the next day - would wake dad with a gingerly rendered rub of his wiry shoulders. After a couple of minutes of ill-tempered stirring, dad would rub the sleep from his full-moon eyes and stretch his legs out dead-straight as if dealing with a troublesome attack of leg cramps. Then he would spring to his feet, bound up the stairs, wash, change and head down to The Trafford Social Club. 'See you in a mo,' he'd say on the way out. But I never did. By the time he got home I would be tucked up in bed dreaming of scoring the winning goal in the FA Cup Final, or, as puberty kicked in, scoring with my uncommonly promiscuous neighbour, Theresa O'Grady, a Catholic girl who from the age of twelve religiously answered yes to any request from boys unless it was related to the catechism.

Come the weekend, our paths crossed slightly more often, but only ever so slightly. Saturday mornings I played football, Saturday afternoons dad went to football. I was a pretty decent goalkeeper in what was then known as the continental mould (good at shot-stopping, not so clever in the air) and would have loved dad to come and watch me dive around like Lev Yashin between the sticks. However, I could count on one hand the number of times he made an appearance behind my goal and still have a finger left to dunk in my tea. When I was picked up by team manager Mr Wakefield's battered Ford Transit in the morning, dad was still in bed. By the time I

dragged my muddy bones back home dad was gone; down The Trafford for his pre-match drink. Both his chosen watering hole and Old Trafford were barely a goal kick from our house in Colley Street so he didn't have far to go. If United's first team were playing away of a Saturday he would go and watch the reserves. And if, by some strange quirk of the fixture list or the FA Cup draw, both sides were on the road, he would go and watch the youth team. If the Old Trafford tea-ladies had been playing my dad would have gone. Anything but stay at home. In that sense, dad was a 'proper bloke', albeit proper in an unreconstructed way which had little in common with mum's definition.

As a boy, the only significant time I spent with dad on Saturdays was watching the teatime scores on Grandstand. Despite the fact we lived so close to the ground, dad would always leave five minutes early. 'See you in a mo,' he'd tell Uncle Morris, his terrace partner on the Stretford End. 'Got to beat the traffic.' Then he'd walk the deserted streets to our house and, like clockwork, amble through the front door just as the latest scores on the teleprinter were being nudged off the screen by final results. If United had scored in those last five minutes, we'd know because of the rumble of noise from around the corner. However, the occasional late goal by the visitors would catch dad unawares. 'Manchester United 1 Aston Villa 1' intoned the BBC's voice of authority, David Coleman, 'which means United move up two places in the table on goal difference, while Villa slip a place because Arsenal won today.' Or words to that effect. My poker-faced dad might raise an eyebrow, but he would never express surprise, joy or disappointment. After Grandstand, dad would have his tea, his nap, and then head down to The Trafford again. From the age of eight or nine, I was allowed to wait up and watch Match Of The Day with him when he got back home at ten-thirty. If he was flush, he'd bring fish and chips back. If not, we'd have toast.

Though dad spent much of his time watching football, he was never one for talking about the game. Especially with me. Given that it was just about the only thing we had in common (apart from the ghostlike presence in the kitchen; the woman who laid out the kit and provisions for our everyday lives but rarely took an active role in the match itself), this was unusual behaviour, though that is hindsight speaking. As a boy I thought nothing of it.

True to form, dad liked to watch Match Of The Day in reverential silence,

even before he nodded off, generally about halfway through as United vs. Liverpool or Arsenal vs. Leeds made way for Fulham vs. Leicester or Coventry vs. Stoke. If I tried discussing the highlights his eyes would glaze over with undisguised boredom; understandable when I was a whippersnapper and didn't have a clue what I was talking about, but a habit he never shed, even when I grew older and started to form reasonably coherent opinions about players, managers and the merits of 4-4-2.

I was seven when England played West Germany in the World Cup final. Saturday July 30th, 1966 fell on the first day of our annual fortnight at Sun Valley (ha ha!) Caravan Park in Morecambe Bay. After wolfing down his dinner with uncharacteristic relish, dad mumbled 'See you in a mo,' and headed to a pub called The Jolly Roger to watch the game on TV. It may have been the Swinging Sixties (not that you would have noticed on Colley Street) but that July day was just about the sole occasion in the whole decade that landlords braved medieval licensing restrictions to stay open beyond the legal closing time of 2.30 pm and then all through the match, which kicked off, as all football matches did once upon a time, at 3 o'clock. Not that the boozy landmark made any difference to me. Pubs back then were strictly off-limits for children. I was left back in the caravan listening to the final on a transistor radio that was more temperamental than an Argentinian defender. For her part, mum sat outside on a deck chair and knitted her way through the most significant 120 minutes in England's sporting history. Needless to say, I was overcome with excitement when the final whistle blew and England had defeated the 'Jerrys' 3-2 to become World Champions for the first time. I say 3-2 because the stropky tranny finally got itself sent off shortly before Geoff Hurst rattled in number 4 and I didn't cotton on to the correct score until dad bought the Sunday Mirror the next day. When he'd arrived back at the caravan after the game, I did make a vain attempt to ply him with questions about the goals and controversies, but his eyes did their usual rolling motion before he cut me off with a gruff, 'We won, didn't we, what else is there to know?' Then he stepped back outside and asked mum why his tea wasn't ready.

The only time I can remember my father showing any emotion about a football match – and given how exceptional this was, it remains the clearest image of my entire childhood - was two years later, when Manchester United beat Benfica 4-1 in the 1968 European Cup Final. To this day, I retain a vivid picture of him leaping up from the settee and punching the air every

time United scored. In a common-or-garden United supporter this would have been considered normal behaviour. In my dad's case, I guess - and I am guessing, because we never actually spoke about it - his behaviour that night simply marked him out as a Mancunian of a very specific generation; a man who may have been taciturn to an extreme, but still a man of his time.

Ten years earlier, in February 1958, eight members of United's Busby Babes – a preternaturally talented team that seemed destined to dominate European football in the 1960s – had been among 23 fatalities when British European Airways Flight 609 crashed on its third attempt to take off from a slush-covered runway at Munich. For Mancunians my father's age – he was born in October 1937, the same month as Bobby Charlton, one of the survivors - there was an undeniable emotional residue in the European triumph of 1968; United's first ever European Cup, ten years and eight players too late. The fact that Charlton scored twice against Benfica and that another of the crash survivors, Matt Busby, was still the manager, added to the poignancy of the occasion. Dad's rare display of emotion aside, my abiding memory of the game is the fact that it went to extra-time. After watching the game from the torture chair in the living room, I had a stiff neck for days.

Dad had personal reasons for acting out of character that night, too. As a lad, he had attended the same Ordsall Park school as the youngest crash victim, twenty-one year old Eddie Coleman, and they'd also played football together for Salford Lads' Club, where Coleman's trademark body swerve earned him his nickname 'Snakehips'. A photo of brylcreemed youngsters from the club on a day trip to Blackpool took pride of place on our mantelpiece throughout my childhood. A grinning Coleman, who like many sons of toil in the 1950s looked older as a teenager than the average middle-aged man a generation later, held centre-stage in the battered snap, holding a toffee apple in one hand and a bottle of pale ale in the other. The other Salford lads look equally middle-aged, the pinched expressions of poverty and low expectations engraved into every premature wrinkle. Typically, dad is in the background, his back to the camera and leaning over the pier railings, no doubt watching the donkeys have a kick about on the beach.

Unlike my father, who never seemed to have a favourite anything apart from Double Diamond, I grew into a pretentious git who judged people almost entirely by what they liked. When The Smiths posed outside the

Salford Lads' Club for the cover of *The Queen Is Dead* I couldn't wait to get round to dad's house and show him. He claimed to have never heard of The Smiths, despite the fact they were heart-on-their-sleeves Mancunians, but the cover photo did prompt a once-in-a-lifetime bout of reminiscing. As it turned out, another Salford native, Albert Finney, used to play ping pong with dad and 'Snakehips' at the very same club. In 1960 Finney sealed his escape from a life of pre-ordained drudgery by playing a stropky factory worker (not much of a stretch that) in the kitchen sink drama *Saturday Night And Sunday Morning*. 'Never forgot where he came from did our Albert,' said dad. 'D'you know he turned down a knighthood? Said they perpetuated snobbery.' He could have turned down his part in that bloody travesty *Annie*, as well, I thought. A thought I kept to myself, not wanting to ruin the moment. Instead I tried to impress dad with The Smiths' local credentials, telling him that Morrissey had been born in the same ward as me at the Park Hospital in Davyhulme. His response to that nugget was, 'Morrissey? Christened without a first name, was he?' Then I told him that Johnny Marr had once had trials for Man City, though I omitted the guitarist's own recollection of the occasion: 'I was good enough for City, but they didn't follow up because I was probably the only player out there wearing eyeliner.'

It would be another thirty-one years before United reached their next European Cup final, in May 1999 against Bayern Munich in Barcelona, the city that had by then been my home for the previous eight years. I had originally drifted over to Spain to work on the construction of the athletes' village for the 1992 Olympic Games, and though there had never been a master plan, I'd never quite made it back to Lancashire. I was a reasonably conscientious builder in a trade dominated by cowboys and made a decent living renovating flats in up and coming neighbourhoods in the Catalan capital. On the rare occasions I did pause to think about my longer term future ('Barcelona or Manchester? Manchester or Barcelona?') logic would intervene (Sun or sleet? Blue skies or bleak skies? Paella or pasties?) and I would stay put.

During my first couple of years as an expat I phoned home every Sunday morning. On the rare occasions dad played mum and actually picked the phone up, proceedings never extended beyond, 'Er, hello son, I'll put your mother on... see you in a mo.' In April 1994, mum passed away in her sleep, quietly, without a fuss, the same way she had lived her 58 years in a

couple of square miles of Manchester. Not long after, I gave up the phone calls; the monosyllabic conversations and awkward silences were just too excruciating. I only made exceptions for Christmas Day, Cup Final day, and birthdays, though I know for a fact that dad never remembered mine, and given his ingrained distaste for 'folk making a fuss' he would never have celebrated his own, even if he had noticed it slipping by.

Though my father hardly encouraged me to play the dutiful son, there remained a nagging sense of guilt on my part, so when United beat Juventus in the Champions League semi-final to reach the Nou Camp final, I saw it as the perfect opportunity to treat him to a jaunt in Spain. All but a handful of the 18,000 ticket allocation to FC Barcelona members landed in the grubby paws of English touts, but happily, I didn't have to barter with some lowlife from Moss Side, Toxteth or Bethnal Green. One of my regular sources of work, a Catalan property dealer who seemed to be single-handedly renovating the old market neighbourhood of El Born, offered me a pair of tickets as soon as I mentioned my dad was a lifelong United supporter. Like many Barça season ticket holders Jordi was no great football fan, but he was also nobody's fool and knew full well that being a card-carrying member of Catalonia's sporting behemoth was essential for business networking. I bit my tongue, reserved my usual tirade against Catalonia's blue and red sect, and thanked him profusely.

When I phoned dad with the news, his immediate response was to um and ah while trying to invent an excuse to pass on the offer. By then he wasn't a healthy man. A couple of years earlier he had been diagnosed with mesothelioma, a type of lung cancer that besets workers who have been exposed to asbestos; in dad's case, probably a result of removing friable asbestos from railway carriages in the 1950s and 1960s. Soon after mum had died, he had moved into digs back in Salford. On the sole occasion I visited him there I had been devastated both by his deteriorating appearance – the always doleful eyes seemed to be sinking into an increasingly alien pallor – and the decrepid surroundings. For weeks after I regularly woke up in cold sweats from a nightmare where dad was being tortured by sadistic boy-hoodlum Pinkie in his squalid Brighton Rock bedsit. Egged on by yours truly. Awake, I didn't need to be a doctor to realise that dad's medical condition, characterised by a hacking cough and shortness of breath, was exacerbated by living in a dank room at the top of five flights of rickety stairs.

'It's a long trip to Barcelona, son,' he mumbled down the line, as I pitched the Nou Camp trip to him, 'and the game's on a Wednesday, which is the day I pick my pension up from the post office.'

'Dad, even pensioners are allowed to go on holiday,' I insisted, 'and when was the last time you got away for a few days?'

Then came a long pause. Dad was either blanking me or racking his brains for another excuse. Even healthy and with a few bob in his pocket (before British Railways had deemed him surplus to requirements and he'd been forced to take a minimum wage job at Colgate in Salford), he'd never been keen on travelling. In fact, he had ventured abroad just twice and neither experience had been positive. Shortly after I left home in 1978, he took mum on a Thomson package tour to Magaluf with Uncle Morris and Auntie Rose. Morris and Rose weren't my real uncle and aunt, but when I was a kid, we referred to all our parents' friends that way, blood-ties or not. And related or not, Morris and dad certainly went back a long way. They had gone to school with 'Snakehips', been friends for nearly forty years, and had been going to Old Trafford together almost as long. But after that week in Magaluf they never spoke again. To this day, I still don't know what provoked the fault line.

A couple of years later, mum and dad went to Benalmadena on another package tour. Unfortunately, the package included rotten mussels on the opening night and dad spent the rest of the week caged up in a tiny hotel room with severe stomach pains. Mum, never much of a one for venturing out on her own, even back in Manchester, sat in the room all week keeping him company, which, given that dad was off his food and therefore 'What's for tea?' had been struck off the conversational menu, probably involved less dialogue than a Buster Keaton movie. Uncle Morris had once told me that Dad's resemblance to the bug-eyed Keaton had earned him the childhood nickname 'Buster'. Not surprisingly, the moniker didn't survive dad's coming-of-age. In truth, any kind of nickname would have sat incongruously with a character so nondescript he was borderline invisible.

All told, dad wasn't exactly longing to come over to Spain for the final, but in the end I talked him round. Drawing a veil over the perma-smog that hangs over Barcelona like an industrial pea-souper in a Lowry painting, I told him that the Mediterranean air would be good for his ailments while assuring him I would book his flights and get an old friend back home to ferry him to Manchester airport. I even told him that I had already booked

and paid for rooms in the posh Hotel Princesa Sofia next to the ground as an extra treat. The latter was a white lie (I booked the rooms later) but the clincher. If dad did have anything approaching a maxim, it was 'Waste not, want not'.

He flew over on the afternoon before the match. I picked him up at the airport, we took a black and yellow taxi into Barcelona, and after checking in at the hotel he immediately retired for a nap. 'See you in a mo,' turned into three hours, even though I had told him, as he took a pair of threadbare slippers out of the duty-free shop bag that was his only luggage, that Spaniards considered the optimum siesta length to be just twenty minutes. When he finally woke up, I took him for a meal at El Salamanca restaurant nestled alongside Barceloneta beach. After I had diligently translated everything on the menu he simply chose things he could point to in the refrigerated display unit: a French omelette sandwich, a slice of Spanish omelette, and a plate of patatas bravas. I told him that this was akin to popping down the chippie in Colley Street and ordering a bag of chips with potato scallops and another bag of chips on the side. He coughed and spluttered, 'Gone all posh with yer eating habits, have you? You never complained about chip butties when you were a nipper.' By dad's standards that was a speech, so I dropped the subject. After eating, I suggested a drink on the Ramblas, which were already thronging with United fans, but dad said he was tired and would prefer an early night. By nine-thirty, about the time Spaniards would be venturing out for supper, I was back in my hotel room reading *El Mundo Deportivo* – from front to back, one advantage of newspapers which contain nothing but sport.

On the morning of the game, I suggested breakfast on the Ramblas, but again dad preferred to stay at the hotel. 'The buffet looks perfectly good to me, son, and if it's paid for...' There were scores of well-known football faces in the downstairs breakfast lounge, Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger and retired ITV commentator Brian Moore, among them. And then ... and then, there was my boyhood idol; Denis Law no less. In the 1960s, Law had formed part of United's iconic 'Holy Trinity' alongside Bobby Charlton and George Best. All three won the European Footballer of the Year award during one five-year period, still an unprecedented feat by three players from one club in such a short space of time. The names of Charlton and Best resonate more down the generations, but back in the '60s, neither England's World Cup hero or the 'Fifth Beatle' were crowned 'The King of

Old Trafford' by terrace chants from the Stretford End. That honour was reserved for Law, a measure of his status among the United hardcore. So when I spotted the still sprightly-looking Scot, tucking into his continental breakfast barely twenty feet away from our own table, I could barely contain my excitement. It wasn't catching. When I nudged dad and indicated that he should look behind him, he glanced over his shoulder, turned back a full three-quarters of a second later and muttered, 'Hmm, Denis Law.' End of conversation.

We spent the morning bar-hopping on the Ramblas and then had lunch at the El Corté Ingles department store on Plaça Catalunya; admittedly, not an inspired choice, but I thought dad might appreciate the panoramic view from the top-floor restaurant and the self-service bar meant no wasted energy translating menus. He conceded that the view was 'Not bad' - high praise indeed - but showed little enthusiasm for his lunch, a bikini ('Funny name for a toasted cheese and ham sandwich') washed down with several bottles of lager. If the truth be told, eating seemed to aggravate dad's rasping cough, though even before the mussels in Benalmadena his diet had increasingly resembled a liquid one. As a child I was a veritable *Oliver Twist* and as an adult I could still eat for England. My father, however, seemed to survive on Double Diamond, Bovril and Milk of Magnesia.

Dad spent the afternoon back in his room having another forty winks. I woke him up at six and suggested we stroll down to the stadium to soak up the atmosphere. Rubbing his watery eyes with the heels of his hands, he asked me what time kick-off was. When I told him 8.45, he said that it was pointless getting there so early just to hang around. Moreover, he was still 'knackered' from all the walking and there was the biggest TV screen he'd ever seen in his room with all the English channels. Oh, and would I mind ordering down for some proper tea bags and biscuits? I was so desperate I regurgitated some pap I'd heard on Sky Sports earlier that day: 'C'mon dad, Sir Matt (Busby) would have been ninety today if he was still alive. I bet he's soaking up the atmosphere from the VIP box in the sky.' To no avail. The winks and the PG Tips had it.

After much cajoling I finally dragged dad out of his room and down to the Nou Camp for half past eight. After showing our tickets (nobody on the turnstile bothered asking for our membership ID; luckily, given that I look nothing like Jordi and dad even less like his wife Carmen, the theoretical ticket holders), we made our way past the stalls selling blood

sausage sandwiches and lukewarm Estrella beer and then took the Starship Enterprise-sized elevator up to the stadium's top tier. An elevator with its own uniformed operator for chrissakes. I nudged dad, whispering, 'Just like Shirley MacLaine in *The Apartment*', though, in truth, this particular operator was male and looked more like Jack Lemmon's hapless suitor from the same movie. After climbing to a height of 60 metres in a matter of seconds, we stepped out of the lift into our allocated block in the sky; prime seats immediately above the directors' box with spectacular views all the way across the city to the Collserola hills and the iconic communications tower designed by Stockport lad done-good, Sir Norman Foster. I will admit, begrudgingly, that the Nou Camp is a majestic arena. Most first-timers, even more worldly sports fans, are awestruck when they first step out into the nosebleed seats. My dad's sole comment, despite the balmy Mediterranean evening, was, 'There's not much of a roof is there. What happens if it rains?'

'This year's Match of the Century', like 'so many unique occasions' as the oxymoron-spouting Fourth Estate had billed it, was a complete dud. United had been the best side in Europe all season, but the midfield fulcrum of Roy Keane and Paul Scholes were absent through suspension, and Alex Ferguson's team were, in the brutally honest words of one of their on-duty players, 'Crap'. As a sterile game entered its dying minutes, United were one-nil down to a less than vintage Bayern side. It looked like Manchester's thirty-year wait for a second European Cup triumph was to continue a while longer.

With exactly five minutes to go, dad turned to me and pronounced the longest sentence he'd uttered during the whole game: 'Let's go, lad. We'll be wanting to beat the traffic.' 'But dad,' I protested, 'we're walking, and the hotel is only five minutes away.' 'Yes,' he replied, coughing phlegm into what looked suspiciously like a Princesa Sofia hand towel, 'but it'll take forever to get out of here with all the crowds.' With which he got up and headed for the exit, leaving me little choice but to jump up and follow him.

We took the elevator back down with only the bemused Jack Lemmon clone for company. Clearly he was not a lift operator by vocation and there was no pretence of servility as he pointedly ignored us while following the game's dying moments on a miniature radio (shades of '66 and the caravan park in Morecombe, I thought, recalling another frustrating climax). Then as we were walking out of the stadium onto the surrounding concourse

there was an eruption of sound, like a disgruntled jumbo jet calibrating its forces before attacking the heavens. I stopped in my tracks, stunned. United fans in the stadium outnumbered their German counterparts by two to one, so it was clear what had happened. As I now know, the game was in injury time, the 91st minute to be precise, and Teddy Sheringham had nudged the ball home to level the scores at 1-1.

‘Dad, dad, we’ve equalised,’ I shouted, hysterically. His response was a barely perceptible shrug of the shoulders. ‘Sod’s law, that is, son.’ I was used to dad’s stunted emotions, but surely not even he could be this blasé? ‘Quick, let’s go back up,’ I implored. ‘Not much point,’ he replied, unmoved, ‘lightning won’t strike twice.’ The words had barely parted from his lips when it did. The kind of ear-splitting, thundering wall of sound that Phil Spector could only dream about. I was dumbfounded. Flabbergasted. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I knew United had scored again. As I now know, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer had deflected the winning goal home with the clock showing 92 minutes and 17 seconds. In less than two minutes United had completed the most theatrical comeback in the history of European finals. And we were stood outside the stage door in a bloody car park. Barely seconds later there was a third and final explosion of noise and the game was over. Fleeting, I considered suggesting we go back in to see United lift the trophy. Almost as quickly I desisted. If dad had broken the habit of a lifetime and said yes, the experience would have been too bittersweet to bear.

Five minutes later we were back at the Princesa Sofia. I tamely suggested a celebratory drink in the bar, which was deserted apart from an elderly Japanese couple poring over a Gaudy Barcelona guidebook (either they were racier than they looked or the fabled architect of Sagrada Familia had been knocked over by a tram again, this time in translation). Luckily, dad insisted he was tired and would prefer to lie down in his room, grab a Carlsberg – ‘Look, they’ve got English beer,’ he’d observed the day before, peering at the contents of the mini-bar - and watch the telly. I accompanied him silently to his room and helped the frail old man, the virtual stranger I had known all my life, open the door with his swipe card. ‘See you in a mo,’ he said. I muttered goodnight and went back to my room to get quietly sozzled, watching re-runs of the Final drama on TV in more languages than you could throw a Berlitz tape at.

The following morning, we checked out after an early breakfast and

caught a taxi to the airport. I bought dad a bottle of Johnnie Walker and the Mirror (its front cover showed the delirious United players under a shower of ticker-tape; headline 'Pride of Britain') and slipped them in the plastic bag with his slippers. 'Ta-ta, dad,' I said, patting him awkwardly on the shoulder, 'Take care.' 'Will do, lad,' he replied. The terminal was full of United fans, still drunk on a combination of alcohol and adrenalin, complete strangers kissing and embracing. Me and dad weren't about to break the habits of a lifetime, though. 'See you in a mo,' he mouthed as he parted through the customs gate. Then, with a half-hearted wave, he was gone.

That was the last conversation I ever had with my father. Three months later the asbestos stain on his lungs finally did for him. The native segment of Barcelona was shut down for the holidays and I was on a month's road trip in the States with my girlfriend (wife-to-be, ex-wife to be) from Poblenuu. My father died on August 23, a day we spent cruising aimlessly between Winslow and Flagstaff on the Arizona stretch of Route 66. I didn't find out about his death until I arrived back in Barcelona two weeks later and picked up a message on my answering machine. A disgruntled landlord took a full ten seconds to tell me my father had passed away and the remainder of the tape before the beep cut him short, ranting about unpaid rent.

As the only known relative I had to fly back to Manchester to attend to the legal niceties and pick up dad's belongings. The latter, the detritus of a lifetime, barely filled a couple of holdalls, all of which I binned, apart from two crumpled photos. The first one, a fading studio portrait of mum and dad dated April 1958, I had never seen. The other was dad's snapshot on the pier with 'Snakehips'.

The two people I spoke to who had actually attended the funeral (exactly half the gathering) both said it was 'a nice do', though apparently there had been one last-minute hitch. Because he had died intestate my father was cremated, and as a surreal footnote to a prosaic life, the conveyor belt charged with transporting his plain wooden coffin to the incinerator grumbled into action prematurely, whisking dad away five minutes before the vicar had finished the service. True to form, my father beat the traffic. 'See you in a mo, dad. See you in a mo.'