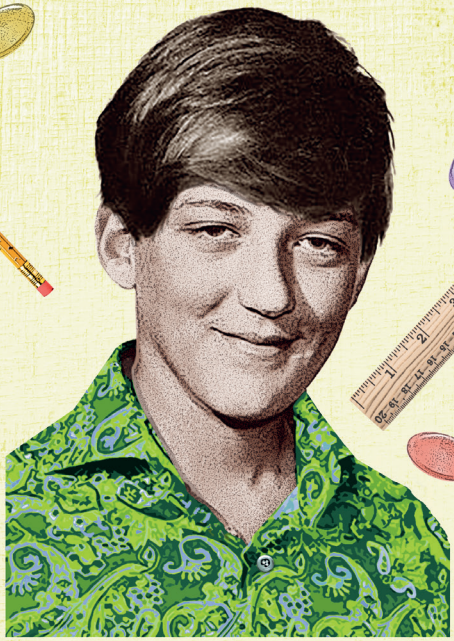
Stephen Fry

'Poignant, funny, intelligent, frank'
Sunday Telegraph



MOAB IS MY WASHPOT

THE BESTSELLING MEMOIR

MOAB IS MY WASHPOT

Stephen Fry is an award-winning comedian, actor, presenter and director. He rose to fame alongside Hugh Laurie in *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (which he co-wrote with Laurie) and *Jeeves and Wooster*, and was unforgettable as General Melchett in *Blackadder*. He has hosted over 180 episodes of QI, and has narrated all seven of the Harry Potter novels for the audiobook recordings. He is the bestselling author of four novels – *The Stars' Tennis Balls*, *Making History*, *The Hippopotamus* and *The Liar* – as well as three volumes of autobiography – *Moab is My Washpot*, *The Fry Chronicles* and *More Fool Me*. *Mythos* and *Heroes*, his retelling of the Greek myths, are both *Sunday Times* bestsellers.

Praise for MOAB IS MY WASHPOT

'One of the most poignant, funny, intelligent, frank and horribly addictive books you're likely to read all year' *Sunday Telegraph*

'A remarkable, perhaps even unique, exercise in autobiography . . . that aroma of authenticity that is the point of all great autobiographies: of which this, I rather think, is one' *Evening Standard*

'Stephen Fry is one of the great originals . . . This autobiography of his first twenty years is a pleasure to read, mixing outrageous acts with sensible opinions in bewildering confusion . . . That so much outward charm, self-awareness and intellect should exist alongside behaviour that threatened to ruin the lives of innocent victims, noble parents and Fry himself, gives the book a tragic grandeur and lifts it to classic status' *Financial Times*

'He writes superbly about his family, about his homosexuality, about the agonies of childhood . . . some of his bursts of simile take the breath away . . . his most satisfying and appealing book so far' *Observer*

'This is one of the most extraordinary and affecting biographies I have read . . . Stephen is . . . painfully honest when trying to grapple with his ever-present demons, and often, as you might expect, very funny' *Daily Mail*

'The writing is rhapsodic, intoxicated and very touching' *Mail on Sunday*

'[A] wonderful, self-lacerating autobiography' Humphrey Carpenter, *Sunday Times*

'He has produced a remarkable autobiography . . . It makes gripping, sometimes unbearably sad, sometimes confusing reading . . . exhilarating, humane, zany, literary' *Spectator*

'No one can make you feel quite like Stephen Fry can . . . Funny and tormentedly frank' *Time Out*

'Hugely enjoyable . . . compulsively readable . . . Fry is excellent on the details of memory, too, and always able to embellish them with effortless erudition . . . this engaging, engrossing read is as honest a portrait of a young liar as one could hope to read' *Scotsman*

'He is bubbly, funny and charming, and he gives his fans plenty of material if they want to speculate on why he is both so gifted and so wayward' *The Times*

'The jokes . . . transcend the complexes of the joker, turning the Stephenesque into a national as well as a family treasure' *Guardian*

'Not so much an autobiography, more a way of life; discursive, funny, sometimes almost unbelievably sad, opinionated, nostalgic and very infectious' Claire Rayner, *New Statesman*

'Fry can be funny about anything' *Good Book Guide*

'So charming and so acute that one cannot help forgiving him' *Daily Express*

Also available by STEPHEN FRY

Fiction

The Liar
The Hippopotamus
Making History
The Stars' Tennis Balls
Mythos
Heroes
Troy

Non-fiction

Paperweight
Rescuing the Spectacled Bear
The Ode Less Travelled
The Fry Chronicles
More Fool Me

Stephen Fry

MOAB IS MY WASHPOT

arrow books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Arrow Books
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

Arrow Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK

First published in Great Britain by Hutchinson in 1997
First published in paperback by Arrow Books in 1998
This edition published by Arrow Books in 2021

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9780099457046

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C018179
FSC
www.fsc.org

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For You

The Book of D., Verse 10, Chapter 11

To live is to war with trolls in heart and soul. To write is to sit in judgement on oneself.

Henrik Ibsen

The interests of a writer and the interests of his readers are never the same and if, on occasion, they happen to coincide, this is a lucky accident.

W. H. Auden

The author and publishers thank the following for permission to reproduce extracts and song lyrics:

Enemies of Promise by Cyril Connolly – © by permission of the Estate of Cyril Connolly c/o Rogers Coleridge & White Ltd, 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

Looking Back by Norman Douglas – The Society of Authors as the Literary Representative of the Estate of Norman Douglas.

Hitler: A Study in Tyranny by Alan Bullock – reprinted by permission of Hamlyn (a division of Reed Books Limited).

Portnoy's Complaint by Philip Roth – © 1969 Philip Roth, reprinted by permission of Random House Inc., 201 East 50th Street, New York, NY 10022, and Jonathan Cape, Random House UK, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA.

'Notes on the English Character' from *Abinger Harvest*, and *Obituary of Roger Fry*, both by E. M. Forster – by permission of the Provost and Scholars of King's College Cambridge, and The Society of Authors as the literary representative of the E. M. Forster Estate.

Review of E. M. Forster's *Abinger Harvest*, by Desmond MacCarthy, from *The Sunday Times* 22 March 1936 © Times Newspapers Limited 1936.

'I'm a Believer'. Words and music by Neil Diamond © 1966 (renewed 1994) Stonebridge Music and Foray Music and Sony Music Publishing, and © 1966, Screen Gems-EMI Music Inc, USA. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reproduced by permission of Screen Gems-EMI Music Ltd, London WC2H 0EA.

'Sport'. Words and music by Vivian Stanshall © 1969, reproduced by permission of EMI Music Publishing Ltd, London WC2H 0EA.

Every effort has been made to seek copyright permission, and the publishers apologise for any inadvertent breach.

Introduction

This book, which covers the first twenty years of my life, was published in 1997, at the very time my second twenty were coming to an end. The first twenty were turbulent years, years crammed with *Sturm* and stuffed with *Drang*, years so keenly felt and lived with such noisy desperation and agonised intensity that they were to form an obsessional part of much of my later life. Especially my writing life. I had written some years earlier a novel called *The Liar* which covers a little of the same territory as *Moab*: schoolboy love, schoolboy rebellion, schoolboy transgression and all the sweet torments, wild tortures and savagely cherished tribulations that adolescence brings.

I was astonished and entirely delighted that the book found so large and responsive an audience. I had privately hoped, but with little real expectation, that a readership might exist who were free enough of (inverted) snobbery and rich enough in proper imagination to see and understand that a childhood is a childhood, no matter what its outer trappings. At the increased distance of a further fourteen years, much of the world I summon up in the book seems all the more remote, privileged, old-fashioned and . . . well, frankly Hogwarts. Yet the absurd trembling soul of a needy, hopeless, lovelorn teenager is surely the same whatever the milieu? Many, perhaps most, of the letters I have received from readers of *Moab* have been been from girls educated at state schools whose lives have been, superficially, very different from mine, yet which underneath have been very similar indeed. For, as I say in the book, adolescence is a kind of republic: all who live there are equal, and those of us who have found it hardest to escape have something in common that money, gender, sexuality and background cannot smother or disguise.

The question I am most often asked concerns of course the cursed title. Moab is your *what*pot? Who is Moab, what is a washpot and just what the curried hell is going on? Well, the line comes, as you may know, from the book of Psalms. I have always held it as a perfect

example of an Old Testament sort of a phrase: rich, resonant and rewarding, whatever its meaning and reference. I must have first heard it read out in a lesson at school. It goes on to talk of humiliating Edom and, most importantly for me, exulting over Philistia. As a teenager I always carried in my mind the idea that the world was a battle ground for the war between beauty and the barbarians, between the aesthetic and the athletic, between sensitive souls like me and Philistines like just about everyone else. At a school where rugby was revered above reading, writing or thinking, I imagined myself as one who would subdue and conquer those whom Kipling scorns in *The Islanders*:

> Then ye returned to your trinkets; then ye contented your souls
> With the flannelled fools at the wicket or the muddied oafs at the goals.

I was mocking myself with the title, mocking the rebarbative, supersensitive and insanely solipsistic soul that I was. Did I really think I would beat the world? Life comes down, in the course of my teenage years, not to acutely articulated rebellion and high artistic disdain, but to squalidly greedy, stubborn and sly criminality. Heigh-ho.

For all his deceit, delusion and degeneracy, I cannot but like and admire the creature I was then and I think, somehow, most readers feel the same. I like to believe that this is because they recognise some of their own adolescence in mine. It is the primary arrogance of writers to assume that what they feel or felt must be what everyone feels or felt. Extreme as my childhood was, its lineaments are perhaps not so very different from yours.

Here *Moab* is again, in a fresh new jacket hoping to find a fresh new readership. I hope when you meet the young Stephen Fry who lurks within, you will enjoy his company. He means well and, like you and everyone else in the world, he is only looking for love. That is his besetting sin and redeeming virtue.

Joining In

'Look, Marguerite . . . England!'
Closing lines of *The Scarlet Pimpernel,* 1934

1

FOR SOME REASON I recall it as just me and Bunce. No one else in the compartment at all. Just me, eight years and a month old, and this inexpressibly small dab of misery who told me in one hot, husky breath that his name was Samuelanthonyfarlowe-bunce.

I remember why we were alone now. My mother had dropped us off early at Paddington Station. My second term. The train to Stroud had a whole carriage reserved for us. Usually by the time my mother, brother and I had arrived on the platform there would have been a great bobbing of boaters dipping careless farewells into a sea of entirely unacceptable maternal hats.

Amongst the first to arrive this time, my brother had found a compartment where an older boy already sat amongst his opened tuck-box, ready to show off his pencil cases and conker skewers while I had moved respectfully forward to leave them to it. I was still

only a term old after all. Besides, I wasn't entirely sure what a conker skewer might be.

The next compartment contained what appeared to be a tiny trembling woodland creature.

My brother and I had leaned from our respective windows to send the mother cheerfully on her way. We tended to be cruelly kind at these moments, taking as careless and casual a leave of her as possible and making a great show of how little it mattered that we were leaving home for such great stretches of time. Some part of us must have known inside that it was harder for her than it was for us. She would be returning to a baby and a husband who worked so hard that she hardly saw him and to all the nightmares of uncertainty, doubt and guilt which plague a parent, while we would be amongst our own. I think it was a tacitly agreed strategy to arrive early so that all this could be got over with without too many others milling around. The loudness and hattedness of Other Parents were not conducive to the particular Fry tokens of love: tiny exertions of pressure on the hands and tight little nods of the head that stood for affection and deep, unspoken understanding. A slightly forced smile and bitten underlip aside, Mummy always left the platform outwardly resolute, which was all that mattered.

All that taken care of, I slid down in my seat and examined the damp shivering thing opposite. He had chosen a window seat with its back to the engine as if perhaps he wanted to be facing homewards and not towards the ghastly unknown destination.

'You must be a new boy,' I said.

A brave nod and a great spreading of scarlet in downy, hamstery cheeks.

'My name's Fry,' I added. 'That's my bro talking next door.'

A sudden starburst of panic in the fluffy little chick's brown eyes, as if terrified that I was going to invite my bro in. He probably had no idea what a bro was.

The previous term I hadn't known either.

'Roger, Roger!' I had cried, running up to my brother in morning break. 'Have you had a letter from –'

'You call me bro here. Bro. Understood?'

I explained everything to the broken little creature in front of me. 'A bro is a brother, that's all. He's Fry, R. M. And I'm Fry, S. J. See?'

The hamster-chick-squirrel-downy-woodland thing nodded to show that it saw. It swallowed a couple of times as if trying to find the right amount of air to allow it to speak without sobbing.

'I was a new boy last term,' I said, a huge and perfectly inexplicable surge of satisfaction filling me all the way from gartered woollen socks to blue-banded boater. 'It really isn't so bad, you know. Though I expect you feel a bit scared and a bit homesick.'

It didn't quite dare look at me but nodded again and gazed miserably down at shiny black Cambridge shoes which seemed to me to be as small as a baby's booties.

'Everybody cries. You mustn't feel bad about it.'

It was at this point that it announced itself to be Samuelanthonyfarlowebunce, and to its friends Sam, but never Sammy.

'I shall have to call you Bunce,' I told him. 'And you will call me Fry. You'll call me Fry S. J. if my bro is about, so there won't be any mix up. Not Fry Minor

or Fry the Younger, I don't like that. Here, I've got a spare hankie. Why don't you blow your nose? There'll be others along in a minute.'

'Others?' He looked up from emptying himself into my hankie like a baby deer hearing a twig snap by a water pool and cast his eyes about him in panic.

'Just other train boys. There are usually about twenty of us. You see that piece of paper stuck to the window? "Reserved for Stouts Hill School" it says. We've got this whole carriage to ourselves. Four compartments.'

'What happens when we get . . . when we get there?'

'What do you mean?'

'When we get to the station.'

'Oh, there'll be a bus to meet us. Don't worry, I'll make sure you aren't lost. How old are you?'

'I'm seven and a half.'

He looked much younger. Nappy age, he looked.

'Don't worry,' I said again. 'I'll look after you. Everything will be fine.'

I'll look after you.

The pleasure of saying those words, the warm wet sea of pleasure. Quite extraordinary. A little pet all to myself.

'We'll be friends,' I said. 'It won't be nearly as bad as you expect. You'll see.'

Kindly paternal thoughts hummed in my mind as I tried to imagine every worry that might be churning him up. All I had to do was remember my own dreads of the term before.

'Everyone's very nice really. Matron unpacks for you, but you've got to take your games clothes down to the bag room yourself, so you'll have to know your school number so as you can find the right peg. My

number's one-o-four which is the highest number in the school's history, but twelve boys left last term and there are only eight or nine new boys, so there probably won't ever be a one-o-five. I'm an Otter, someone'll probably tell you what House you're in. You should watch out for Hampton, he gives Chinese burns and dead legs. If Mr Kemp is on duty he gives bacon slicers. It's soccer this term, my bro says. I hate soccer but its conkers as well which is supposed to be really good fun. My bro says everyone goes crazy at conker time. Conkers bonkers, my bro says.'

Bunce closed up the snotty mess in the middle of my hankie and tried to smile.

'In two weeks' time,' I said, remembering something my mother had told me, 'you'll be bouncing about like a terrier and you won't even be able to remember being a bit nervous on the train.'

I looked out of the window and saw some boaters and female hats approaching.

'Though in your case,' I added, 'you'll be *buncing* about . . .'

A real smile and the sound of a small giggle.

'Here we go,' I said. 'I can hear some boys coming. Tell you what, here's my *Ranger*. Why don't you be reading it when they come in, so you'll look nice and busy.'

He took it gratefully.

'You're so kind,' he said. 'I've never met anyone as kind as you.'

'Nonsense,' I replied, glowing like a hot coal.

I heard the grand sounds of approaching seniors.

'Okay then, Mum,' someone said.

'Don't say "okay", darling. And you will write this time, won't you?'

'Okay, Mum.'

My bro and I never called our parents Mum and Dad. It was always Mummy and Daddy until years later when Mother and Father were officially sanctioned. Towards adulthood we allowed ourselves to use, with self-conscious mock-Pooterism, Ma and Pa.

Last term, I had put my hand up in an art lesson and said, 'Mummy, can I have another piece of charcoal?' The form had howled with laughter.

There again, during the first weeks of summer holidays I often called my mother 'Sir' or 'Matron'.

Bunce buried himself in the Trigan Empire, but I knew that he was listening to the sounds too and I could tell that the confidence and loudness of the other boys' voices terrified him. He clutched the sides of the comic so hard that little rips appeared on the outer pages.

On the way to Paddington after lunch I had felt more dread, infinitely more terror and despair at the prospect of school than I had the term before. During the long summer holiday Roger had told me to expect this. Homesickness was much worse the second and third terms than it was the first. Bunce had come as a godsend therefore, something to take my mind off my own fears.

The door to our carriage slid open with a loud bang.

'Oh God, it's Fry's Turkish Delight. And what the hell are you doing by the window?'

'Hello, Mason,' I said.

'Come on, shove over.'

Bunce started to rise like a courteous old commuter offering his seat to a heavily-packaged woman. 'Would you like . . . ?' he began huskily.

'No, I want Fry's seat, if he hasn't stunk it out yet.'

Well there it was. I felt my face flush scarlet as I got up mumbling something inaudible, and removed myself to the corner seat farthest from the window.

For five minutes I had enjoyed the sensation of someone looking up to and admiring me. Bunce had respected me. Believed in me. Trusted me. Now the little puppy would see that the rest of the school treated me as if I was no one. Just another tiresome squit. I sat in my new seat, trying to look unconcerned and stared down at my bare knees and the grazes and indentations of gravel still there from a bicycle fall. Only yesterday afternoon I had been riding along the lanes listening to skylarks high in the huge Norfolk skies and watching partridges tread stubble in the fields. Three weeks ago I had had my eighth birthday party and been taken to see *The Great Race* at the Gaumont in Norwich.

Mason settled himself into his conquered seat and looked across at Bunce with great curiosity and an air of faint repugnance, as if Bunce might be of a breed he had never run into before and hoped never to encounter again.

'You,' said Mason, kicking across at him. 'Have you got a name then?'

The reply came as something of a shock.

'I have got a name,' said Bunce, rising, 'but it's none of your bloody business.'

Mason looked stupefied. There was nothing in the least bad about him. In taking my seat and remarking on my smell he had meant no particular insult, he was merely exercising the natural privilege of seniority. Seniority is pay-back time. He had been treated like a worm when he was small, now it was his turn to treat

those under him like worms. He was ten, for heaven's sake. He was allowed to wear *long trousers*. At prep school, ten is to eight what forty is to twenty in adult life.

'I'm going over there,' said Bunce, pointing to the seat next to mine. 'It smells better over there.' He threw himself down beside me with a determined bounce on the springs and then ruined everything by bursting into tears.

Mason was denied the chance of any response to this astonishing eruption by the entrance into the compartment of Kaloutsis and his parents. It was not at all done for Family to board the train, but Kaloutsis was Greek and his parents serenely above the finer points of English protocol.

'Ah, and here's a little one,' cried Mrs Kaloutsis, swooping down on Bunce. 'And no one looking after you?'

'Thank you,' Bunce snivelled, 'but Fry S. J. is looking after me very well indeed. *Very* well. Very well *indeed*. I had a smut in my eye and he lent me his handkerchief.'

Train boys were generally the sons of military or colonial parents, and had flown in to London Airport to be picked up by uncles, aunts or godparents who would take them on to Paddington. Most other boys at Stouts Hill were driven to school by their parents.

The reserved compartments filled up over the next quarter-hour with deeply tanned boys returning from hot weeks in places like Northern Rhodesia, Nigeria, India, Aden, the West Indies and Ceylon. One boy, Robert Dale, whom I liked, sat opposite me and Bunce and told us about India. Dale's father edited an English language newspaper in Bombay and

Dale always shouted 'Aiee!' when he was in pain. It had amazed me greatly when I first heard him stubbing his toe against the foot of the bed in the dormitory, since I had never imagined that expressions of pain could vary. I had thought 'Ouch!' and 'Ow!' were the same all over the world. I had suffered a hot and bothered exchange in my first French lesson, for example, when I was told that the French for 'Oh!' was '*Ah!*'

'Then how do they say "Oh", sir?'

'They say "*Ah.*"'

'Well then, how do they say "Ah"?'

'Don't be stupid, Fry.'

I had sulked for the rest of the lesson.

Dale took off his shoes and socks and leaned back. He had the most splendidly fine feet, with a perfect, even spread of toes. At the beginning of every autumn term boys like him who spent their school holidays in Africa, Asia or the West Indies would show off by running across gravel barefoot without any pain. By the end of the term, with winter set in, their feet would have lost their natural tough layers of callused skin and they would be just the same as the rest of us.

A guard looked in and performed a brief headcount. He gazed into the middle distance and told us that the last boy who had rested his foot on a seat had been arrested by the police at Didcot and put in prison, where he still languished on a diet of bread and water.

'Sounds better than school food,' said Dale.

The guard grunted at our giggles and left. Boaters were thrown on to luggage-racks, feet put up on seats and talk turned to soccer, what had been done in the hols, who was going to be made prefect and the whole

Edwardian schoolboy novel nonsense. Mason seemed to have forgotten all about Bunce's strange outburst and was delighting the boy opposite with underarm farts.

After one of those squealing, juddering, stomach-dropping false starts with which trains so tactlessly articulate human emotion, we pulled ourselves out of the great shed of Paddington and steamed west.

The Gloucestershire town of Stroud, sanctified by the memory and to the memory of Laurie Lee, produces – or used to produce – almost all the baize that Britain and her dominions ever thought to use. Baize for the doors into servants' quarters, baize for billiards, snooker and pool, baize for card tables, baize for casinos, auction-rooms and baize to drape over the cages of songbirds to fool them into thinking it night. Some miles to the south of Stroud stands the Bury, a great green hill over whose shoulders one might believe the weavers of the Slad Valley once threw a huge bolt of their baize as a giant billboard to show off their product to the world. The small village of Uley snuggles itself into the thicker nap at the base of this fuzzy-felt hill and sleeps there contentedly, unaware of triple-thick shakes, pay-per-view Fight Nights, Lottery Winsday and driver's side air bags. The village of Uley still believes in Gestetnered parish magazines, dividend tea, sherbet dips, Heinz salad cream and half-timbered Morris vans. The village of Uley grows lobelias and alyssum on the front fringes of lawn that bank up to warm ham-stone cottages out of which rumble the deep tones of Long Wave wireless. The village pub of Uley radiates a warm vapour in which are mingled the vanilla richness of pipe tobacco and the malty hum of

Usher's Ales. The village church of Uley has its fragrance too, a compound of Esso Blue, Mansion furniture wax and hymn books in a state of permanently suspended decay.

High on a mound half a mile away stands Stouts Hill School, a dashing castle of knapped flint, all turrets and arrow-slits and skirted by a dragon-fly flicking, carp-snapping, mallow-flaming lake. The lane from Stouts Hill to the village winds steeply down to the Dursley road. There is horse shit there, dropped in caramac-coloured lumps by warm-sided bay mares ridden by gymkhana-jolly girls who blush fiercely when they meet your eye.

There is horse shit there all right.

In the village of Uley nought-percent-financed Daewoos lurk behind remotely controlled carport doors, satellite dishes glitter from the roofs, copal-varnished slices of barked Do-It-All elmwood proclaim Mulberry Lodge, South Fork and El Adobe. A blackboard outside the village pub vibrates in three-coloured chalk with the promise of Happy Hour, pool, premium guest beers and big screen satellite TV. The smell of stale lager and Doritos leaks up the main street to the church, where laserprinted A4 pages flap announcements from the chancel wall promising car boot sales and outreach fellowship retreats in Wales. Lard-arsed fatties in Russell Athletic sweatshirts swap Sensual Love Guide CD-ROMs with their neighbours as their Nike-ticked kids line up burger cartons on the barbecue patio and zap them with turbo-boosted water guns. The girls smear blusher on their cheeks and poke their tongues out fiercely when they meet your eye. Stouts Hill the school has closed now, to be replaced by Stouts Hill the time-share holiday home.

Well, maybe it's not so bad. Somewhere between warm gloop and cold water is the tepid truth about the village of Uley, which gets on with life as charmingly as it can. There was a time when the very Mansion furniture wax, dividend tea and gymkhana girls of sentimental memory were themselves modern and noisomely resented intrusions; books will one day be written that recall CD-ROMs and Russell Athletic sweatshirts in a nostalgic melancholy haze as fervent and foolish as any.

We will cut, just for a moment, to London. These days I have a flat in St James's, that elegant parcel of metropolitan clubland bordered by Piccadilly, Pall Mall, St James's Street and Lower Regent Street. It suits, I suppose, my self-image – or rather that image of me others have that I often weak-mindedly allow to become my self-image – to live in St James's. St James's has long been the natural habitat of the upper class English bachelor. Here he may browse for shirts and ties in Jermyn Street, for hats and shoes in Lock's and Lobb's, for foodstuffs in Fortnum's, for literature in Hatchards and the London Library, and for company in Brooks's, White's, Boodle's, Buck's or (if tragically pushed) in the improbably named East India, Devonshire, Sports and Public School's Club where the best school curry in all London can be found, served with sultanas and slices of banana, washed down with lukewarm London tap water poured into stout little Duralex glasses. I have lived in St James's for the last five years, not a proper English upper class bachelor at all, but tired of Islington, the proper home for people like me, and never at ease west of Hyde Park Corner or south of the Strand.

From my window I can see the clock face of

Christopher Wren's handsome church of St James. Behind it – the other side of Piccadilly – Sackville Street leads up to Savile Row and the great Nash curve of Regent Street. In the year 1961 my parents visited Sackville Street, examining each doorway in turn until they came upon a brass plaque on which was written:

GABBITAS & THRING
SCHOLASTIC AGENCY

In the year 1977 I too visited Sackville Street, looking for the brass plaque that still said:

GABBITAS & THRING
SCHOLASTIC AGENCY

I don't suppose that any writer will ever be able to come up with a partnership that quite matches the ludicrous perfection of the names Gabbitas and Thring.

What is a Scholastic Agency?

Oh, tish now, and come, come, come . . . you know perfectly well.

A scholastic agency is a kind of public and prep school dating agency. It acts as a private sector pimp, procuring staff for short-handed schools, placement for jobless teachers and schools for parents at a loss to know where their little ones might thrive. That second service was of interest to me in 1977, and the third to my mother and father in 1961.

They wanted to find a prep school for my brother Roger and for me. I was four years old then and Roger well on his way to six. Today of course, what with the establishment of social equality, the smashing of the

class system and the achievements of a Nation More At Ease With Itself, by the time your offspring have reached four and five it is *far* too late to be looking for schools: demand for private education is so high that children must be put down for admission not at birth but *in utero*, ideally before their first cells have divided.

There may be some reading this who are hazy (and proudly so) about the precise meanings of 'prep school' and 'public school'.

A prep school is an establishment designed, as the name implies, untypically for a British institution, to prepare a child. In this instance the preparation is for public school. Public school, as the name decidedly does *not* imply, very typically for a British institution, is wholly private. Public schools undertake to guide, mould and instruct pupils aged between thirteen and eighteen. Prep schools accept their intake from somewhere in the region of eight, nine or ten years old, and prepare them for the Common Entrance Examination, a test recognised by all the public schools. Different public schools are satisfied by different CE results. Thus Winchester, which has an interest in only the cleverest boys, would expect CE marks way above seventy per cent, while Malvern and Worksop and Monkton Combe by way of example, might be content with percentages in the nether fifties or upper forties. There is, it follows, no absolute pass mark in the Common Entrance. Public Schools can decide whom they take according to their need to have a fully pupilled and profitable school roll, according to their own sense of academic reputation, according to a candidate's athletic, musical or artistic qualities, or according to his status as offspring of an

old boy or a Great, Rich and Desirable Parent.

At the time of my infancy, the early 1960s, nearly all prep and public schools were single-sex boarding schools. Today, girls are involved to a much greater degree, sometimes only in the Sixth Form, sometimes all the way through. Parents are more reluctant to pack their children off early and may choose to have them attend as day pupils or weekly boarders. Headmasters are younger than they were and more likely to be married. Parents expect more say in the running of a school, to attend more PTA meetings and to complain more vocally about living conditions, discipline and the curriculum. Heating, diet, facilities, syllabus and discipline seem far less Spartan now than they were twenty years ago. But these changes aside, the system, so far as I have been able to ascertain, is much as it was.

It is common enough, all things being equal, for a father to send his sons to the prep school he attended as a boy himself. My father, however, had been a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral and attended its choir school. My brother and I were unlikely to follow in his footsteps. The sound of Roger and Stephen Fry singing, even before Dame Nature had her impertinent pubic way with us, could cause people to stab themselves in the throat with sharpened pencils, jump from high windows, claw out their own inner ears, electrocute their genitals, put on a Jim Reeves record, throw themselves cackling hysterically into the path of moving buses . . . anything, anything to take away the pain. The cathedral choir school of St Paul's with its fussy, outworn emphasis on tunefulness and harmony was never going to be an option. Hence Gabbitas and Thring.

Young Mr Thring – or it may have been old Mr Gabbitas – recommended Stouts Hill Preparatory School, Uley, Near Dursley, Glos. Something in my mother's manner had told them that a friendly, warm place was required and few schools came friendlier than Stouts Hill: friendliness was its most notable feature. The school glowed with a kindly familial warmth that enfolded even the most sensitive, apron-clutching child. Founded and headmastered by one Robert Angus, it was effectively run by his four daughters, Carol, Sue, Paddy and Jane. These four Angus girls, young Mr Gabbitas said – and old Mr Thring signified his agreement by giving the desk a mighty thump – were considerate, charming, enthusiastic, sweet-natured and fun. The pupils all rode (for Miss Jane loved ponies and horses to distraction); there were fishing, boating and ice-skating on the lake; traipsing, nutting and blackberrying in the abundant outlying copses and woods; sailing and bird-spotting at Slimbridge and as much running, jumping, cricketing, ruggering, soccering, Latining, Greeking and Common Entrance preparing as the most doting parent could hope for. The diet was well balanced and nutritious, the school uniform amusing and stylish and the fees as frighteningly expensive as any parent could scream at. Every single Gabbitas and each several Thring was united in his commendation of Stouts Hill, Uley, Glos. and they were not afraid who knew it. My parents and Roger too, after a visit of inspection later in the year, approved warmly.

When my brother began his first term there the Fry family lived in Chesham, Buckinghamshire. When my turn came to follow him in the summer term of the year 1965, we had moved to Norfolk, the other side of

England, two hundred British miles distant from Gloucestershire.

When people today hear that I was sent away to board at a school two hundred miles from home at the age of seven they often raise a disapproving eyebrow, snort a contemptuous snort or fling up a despairing hand at the coldness, cruelty and neglect of parents who could do such a thing to a child of such tender years: the words 'bosom' and 'snatching' and phrases like 'how could any . . . ?' and 'at such an age' and 'no wonder the British are so . . .' are often used.

There is great stupidity in this reaction, or at least minimal imagination, which is more or less the same thing, but morally worse. What is forgotten by those who dislike the idea of children being sent away at an early (or any) age is the matter of expectation and custom. The rightness or wrongness of private boarding education is a separate issue and I change my opinion about it as regularly as I change my socks, the desktop pattern on my computer screen and my views on God.

When I was seven years old every child that I knew of my own age went away to boarding school. Again the rightness or wrongness of being friendly only with children from similar backgrounds is a separate issue. The point is that my father had been to boarding school, my mother had been to boarding school, all the friends I had in the world went away to boarding school. It was what one did. It was Life as I knew it. A child of seven does not question such a circumstance: it is the way of the world. If I had *not* been sent away I should have wondered what was wrong with me. I should have felt neglected and left out. At a local day school I most emphatically should *not* have felt more

loved or more cared for, far from it. Going round to play with friends in the school holidays and listening to their stories of boarding school would have left me feeling miserably excluded and inexplicably singled out for strange and unusual punishment. I know this for a fact, for I *did* spend a term at a primary school and, sweet and friendly as the place was, I couldn't wait to leave and join my brother.

Had we lived in Central London I dare say it might have been different. As it was we were hidden in the mysterious interior of rural East Anglia, where the nearest shop was a twenty-minute bicycle ride away and the nearest friends many miles farther. There was no door-bell ringing and can-Stephen-come-out-to-play-ing in Booton, Norfolk: no cool friends called Zak and Barnaby and Luke, no parks, no Saturday morning cinema clubs, no milk-shake parlours, no buses, no visiting ice-cream vans, no roller-skating rinks. When city-bred friends saw the house I lived in, they cooed with envy and delight at the idea of so much space with so much nature all around. I used to coo with envy when I stayed in a terraced house in suburban London and saw fitted carpets, central heating and drawing-rooms that were called sitting-rooms and had televisions in them.

It is also true that the ineptly hidden distress of my mother at the end of the school holidays gave me more direct, clear testament of absolute love than most children are ever lucky enough to receive at such an early age. That I was fucked up as a child and then as a youth, I cannot deny. That my fucked-up-edness sprang from a sense of betrayal, desertion or withheld love I will not allow.

Roger, my adorable brother, was and is far from

fucked up after all, and he was the first to be sent away and might reasonably be expected to have felt the greater sense of abandonment, there being no elder in whose footsteps he might follow. Jo, my adorable sister, wasn't sent away at all, as girls weren't by then. She was fairly fucked up as a teenager but arguably *because* of the very fact that she didn't go to boarding school. Private education may be a divisive abomination, it may leave its product weird and ridiculous in all kinds of insanitary and peculiar ways, it may have held back the social development of this country, it may be responsible for all kinds of disasters and unpleasantnesses, but in my case it never left me feeling starved of parental love and attention. I think it safe to say that I would have been a fucked up youth had I been given a secondary modern, comprehensive or grammar school education. Whether at boarding school, day school or at home with governesses and private tutors, I would always have been as screwed up as an unwanted letter from the *Reader's Digest*. Wherever I had been, whatever I had done, I should have experienced an adolescence of sturm, drang, disaster and embarrassment.

This is all speculation. The facts are that my brother went to Stouts Hill, my sister was born and then the family moved to Norfolk.

Leaving Buckinghamshire meant leaving Chesham Prep, a day school where I had been having my pre-prep education. The town of Chesham perches itself between London Underground's Metropolitan Line and the Chiltern Hills embarrassedly unsure as to its status: country town or Metroland *banlieu*? Chesham Prep had four Houses – a House being a nominal administrative subdivision or *gau*, that is, not a

physical building. I was in Christopher Columbus, and sported its blue badge with great pride. It took me many years to understand or truly believe that Columbus was actually Italian. Even to this day I can't fully accept it. Why would a school in the heart of England choose a foreign hero? Perhaps they were unaware of his nationality themselves. It was common knowledge that the British discovered everything – trains, democracy, television, printing, jets, hovercrafts, the telephone, penicillin, the flush lavatory and Australia, so it was reasonable to assume Christopher Columbus must have been a Briton. Francis Drake boys – or was the other House Nelson . . . or Walter Raleigh perhaps? I can't quite remember – wore badges of flaming vermilion. Chesham Prep was a co-educational school and my girlfriend, the object of my warm six-year-old affection, was Amanda Brooke, from whose soft charcoal lambswool V-neck glowed Florence Nightingale's proud primrose yellow. Her sister Victoria's jersey flashed with the lime green of Gladys Aylward, Innkeeper of the Sixth Happiness. Victoria was Roger's girlfriend, which kept things neat and in the family, so to speak.

It shames me to remember that eleven years and a couple of expulsions later, at seventeen and on the run from home, I was to return to Chesham, stay as a guest of the Brooke girls and steal a Diner's Club card from their father before running off on a wild nationwide spending spree that ended in prison and disgrace.

It was in the playground of Chesham Prep that I tripped and fell on my face one morning and broke my nose. At the time my nose was a cute little button – if any part of me has ever been cute – and the

accident, although bloody and loud, was unremarkable in the life of a small child. Over the years however, my nose grew and grew and it became apparent by the time I was fourteen that, like its owner, it was not growing straight. From time to time through my teens and beyond I would say, 'I must get this damned nose straightened one day . . .' to which a gushing chorus would always reply, 'Oh no, Stephen, you mustn't . . . it's so *distinguished*.' There is of course nothing distinguished about a bent nose. A duelling scar may rightly be called distinguished, as might a slightly cleft chin or a glamorously imperceptible limp, but a bent nose is idiotic and unpleasant. I suppose people were trying to be kind and protect me from the humiliation of discovering that, even after an operation to straighten my ridiculous nose, I would still look a mess. The trauma of finding out that a straight-nosed Stephen looked every bit as unappetising as a bent-nosed Stephen might have tipped me completely over the edge.

We keep our insignificant blemishes so that we can blame them for our larger defects. The problem of my bent nose comes to mind when I have regular arguments with a friend on political subjects. He is firmly of the opinion that the existence of the monarchy, the aristocracy and the House of Lords is absurd, unjust and outdated. It would be hard to disagree with that. He believes, however, that in the name of liberty and social justice they should be abolished. This is where we part company. I think of the monarchy and aristocracy as Britain's bent nose. Foreigners find our ancient nonsenses distinguished, while we think them ridiculous and are determined to do something about them one day. I fear that when we

do get rid of them, as I suppose we shall, we are going to let ourselves in for the psychic shock of discovering that the process has not made us one jot freer or one ounce more socially equitable a country than France, say, or the United States of America. We will remain just as we are, about *as* free as those countries. We are probably not quite as free at the moment (whatever free might mean) or as socially just (ditto) as the Benelux countries or Scandinavia, and as it happens, Scandinavia and the Benelux countries have monarchs. There will be great psychological damage done to us if we take the step of constitutional cosmetic alteration. The world would stare at us and whisper and giggle about us excitedly, as people always do when friends have had some sort of plastic surgery. We would unwind our bandages, present our new, straight-nosed constitution to the international community and await the fawning compliments and gasps of admiration. How hurt we will be when we see that the international community is actually yawning and, far from being dazzled by the blaze of justice and freedom and beauty that radiates from our features, they are rather indignant that instead of dining in splendour and pageantry with a crowned monarch, their heads of state will in future be lunching at President Hattersley's Residence or sipping tea with Lady Thatcher in some converted People's Palace. Britain would suddenly have no absurd minor blemish to blame for its failures, which are of course no more than the defects of being human. If we concentrated on our real defects; if we blamed our weakness of political will for impeding the achievement of greater social justice rather than pretending that it is all the fault of harmless warts and

daft mannerisms, then we might indeed be better off. The trouble with doing a thing for cosmetic reasons is that one always ends up with a cosmetic result, and cosmetic results, as we know from inspecting rich American women, are ludicrous, embarrassing and horrific. But of course, I am a sentimentalist, and sentimentalists will hunt for any excuse to maintain the more harmless fripperies of the *status quo*.

Hey, we are straying far from our sheep, as they say in France. I was at Chesham Prep, six years old with a budding bent nose and I was going to tell you all about the boy from the Cape.

At Chesham Prep, my form mistress Mrs Edwards gave us all italic pencils which we were allowed to sharpen with knives. She wrote with flat-sided chalk on the blackboard and italic lettering was ever her theme, her message, her purpose and her passion. We were not allowed to write so much as our own names with italic pencils until we had covered page after page of our rough books, first with wavy lines going up and down, up and down, up and down, next with all the letters of the alphabet unjoined, and finally with all the letters of the alphabet joined up in approved style. To this day, every six months or so, at a stationer's, I will buy an Osmiroid calligraphic writing set and practise my italic shapes, thick thin, thick thin, thick thin. I will rule constraining lines and write the alphabet within them, and then I will write the same favourite words from those days: I have always especially loved the way italic tools will render the dots on the letters 'i' and 'j', thus –

i j

– so I take great pleasure in the look of words like –

jiving ~ skiing ~ Hawaii ~ jiujitsu

– and most especially –

Fiji ~ Fijian

After a few days of this kind of arseing about, I will leave the lids off the pens, the nibs will go dry and the special ink will harden into a gummy resin. A week or so later I throw the whole kit away and wonder what the hell I have been playing at.

In the middle of my last term in Mrs Edwards' class a very pretty boy with fair hair and a wide smile arrived. He had come from Cape Town and Mrs Edwards adored him. His italic lettering was as gorgeous as he was and I found myself torn between resentment and infatuation. The boys I fell for subsequently were usually very neat and very well behaved. Far too well behaved for my liking.

Every action and gesture of the boy from Cape Town (who might have been called Jonathan, although perhaps that's a trick of affinity – something to do with the publishers Jonathan Cape) reminded me of my clumsiness of line. My upstrokes were bulky and badly proportioned, his were graceful and pure; my fingers were always inky while his were

always clean, finished off with perfect nails. He had out-turned lips that were most luscious then, but are today probably of that strangely opened out, overmoist quality as common to ex-colonials of the southern hemisphere as sandy eyelashes and wide hips. I expect now he looks like Ernie Els or Kerry Packer. Shame.

Perhaps the boy from Cape Town set the pattern for all the love that lay in store for me. Strange thought. I haven't ever recalled him to mind before this minute. I hope this book isn't to become regression therapy. How unpleasant for you. I do wonder though if he still writes in italics as he did when we were infants, thirty-four years ago.

Sex of course, meant nothing to me. Bottoms and willies featured greatly in life at Chesham from the age of three onwards and they gave perpetual amusement, suffused with intense, muffled delight. There was a boy called Timothy who sat next to me in Mrs Edwards' class. We would pull the back of our shorts and underpants down as we sat at our desks, so that we could feel our bare bottoms against the wooden seats. From the front, to Mrs Edwards' eye, everything would look normal. This excited me hugely: both the bareness of bottom and the secrecy were inexplicably delicious. Not to the point of erection you understand, at least not so far as I remember. Timothy and I would sometimes go into the woods together to play what we called Rudies. Rudies involved peeing up against a tree in as high an arc as we could manage or watching each other poo. All very mysterious. I can't pretend that I find anything appealing in that sexual arena today, although I know that many august personages are

highly pleased by the idea. One is always hearing about those who pay prostitutes to empty their bowels on to glass-topped coffee-tables under which the client lies in a frenzy of excitement, pressing his face up against the excremental outpush. We think this all very English, but as a matter of fact a trawl through the grosser areas of Internet Usenet postings will show that Americans, as in all things *outré*, win the palm with ease. I haven't looked in on the newsgroup alt.binaries.tasteless for a year or so now but it's quite clear there's a big world of scatological weirdness out there. The French come next: I don't suppose anyone who has done so will forget the experience of reading de Sade's *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* and those elegantly disengaged descriptions of the bishop's way with coffee. Then there was that French intellectual and structuralist hero who liked to lie in a trough in gay bars and be pissed on by strangers. No, it may come as a disappointment to you, but the fact is we British are no weirder than anyone else when it comes to sexual oddity, we just *think* we are, which is the basis of our weirdness. Just as it is the *love* of money that it is the root of all evil, so it is the *belief* in shamefulness that is the root of all misery.

I can't for the life of me remember where the woods were that we visited for our rather tame rudies or who Timothy was. His name wasn't Timothy of course, and if he is reading this book now he has probably forgotten the escapades entirely and is reciting it to his wife by the fireside as an example of how he was always right about that disgusting Stephen Fry chap.

I have no memories of early 'sex-games', as the Kinsey and Hite people like to call them, which

involved the opposite sex. A girl did once show me her knickers and I remember finding the elastic and the colour unappealing. I can't recall wanting to know or see more. A friend of mine at university, asked when he knew he was gay, said that he distinctly remembered at the moment of his birth looking back up there and saying, 'Well! That's the last time I'm ever going up one of *those* . . .' I have since shamelessly used this as my own explanation of When I Knew.

I liked girls greatly, except when they bullied me or pursed their lips prissily and said, 'Um! Telling on *you* . . .'

The inelegance of my italics, the shimmering beauty of Jonathan Cape and those occasional rudies with Timothy aside, my six-year-old life is hidden for the moment in an impenetrable mist. I know that I could read well at three and write accurately at four, and that I never ever learned my times table.

In Chesham we dwelt in a very Betjemanesque kind of road called Stanley Avenue. Sherwood House where we lived has since been pulled down and replaced by a housing estate that calls itself a Close. I suppose that means Sherwood House must have been large, but I only remember a few details: a stained glass entrance porch; a booth where a black telephone with a sliding drawer under it lived – the dial had the letters in red so that one could easily call PUTney 4234 and CENtral 5656. I loved to bang the hard bakelite cradle up and down and listen to the hollow, echoing clicks it sent down the line. Sounds are not as evocative as smells, but to anyone over the age of thirty-five the old dialling and hanging-up tones are as instant a transport to the past as the clunking of half-

crowns and the *thlop* of the indicator flipping up on an old Austin motorcar.

I was intensely fascinated by the telephone. Not in the way of a teenage girl chattering for hours lying on her stomach with her thighs pressed together and ankles crossed in the air, but intrigued by how it changed people. In those days, when you were cut off you would rattle the cradle and shout, 'Operator! Operator!' Older people still do it. They don't know that it's as fruitless as pulling at a servant's bell or asking for the Left Luggage office.

They don't know that in the world today . . .

THERE'S NO ONE THERE

They don't know that the Bible is a Customer Service Announcement and that purgatory is when St Peter puts you on hold and sends you into a self-contained menu-driven loop of tone button operated eternity to the sound of Vivaldi's 'Spring'.

The very word 'Hello' only earned its sense of a greeting after the American phone companies hunted about for a new word with which telephonic conversations could politely, unsuggestively and neutrally be initiated, much as the BBC in the 1930s threw open the debate as to what someone who watched television might be called. The wireless had listeners, should television have watchers? Viewer, of course, was the word decided upon. In the case of telephony, the aim was to stop people saying 'Who is that?' or 'How do you do?' or even 'Howdy'. 'Good morning' and 'Good day' had a somewhat valedictory flavour, as well as being of doubtful use in a country divided up into so many time zones. Prior to the 1890s

'hello!' had simply been an exclamation of surprise and interest, with obvious venery overtones. By the turn of the century everyone was writing songs and newspaper articles about 'Hello Girls' and beginning to use the word in real life as salutation's vanilla-flavoured, everyday, entry-level model.

My favourite telephone fact, for this was the time, as I approached seven, that I began to collect facts instead of butterflies, stamps or football cards, was that Alexander Graham Bell was said to have made the following entirely endearing remark soon after he had invented the telephone: 'I do not think I am exaggerating the possibilities of this invention,' he said, 'when I tell you that it is my firm belief that one day there will be a telephone in every major town in America.'

In those days, my father actually went out to work, so I suppose I associate the telephone with my mother and Chesham, its laurels and shrubs and nearby ticking Atco mowers and with a suburban idyll so soon to be replaced in Norfolk by spooky attics, rural isolation and permanent paternal presence. Sherwood House in my mind is where *Just William*'s William lived, it is where Raffles and Bunny went when they wanted to relieve a *parvenue* of her pearls, it is where Aunt Julia had her Wimbledon fastness in Wodehouse's Ukridge stories. In Sherlock Holmes it is the house of the Norwood Builder and the mysterious Pondicherry Lodge. In fact, it is easier for me to remember Sherwood House by opening a page of any one of those books and allowing the flood of image to take over than it is for me to sit down and make a concentrated attempt at genuine recall.

My mother occasionally taught English to foreign

students and history at nearby colleges and schools, but I think of her at a typewriter in the dining room, with myself curled under her feet staring into a gas fire and listening to *Mrs Dale's Diary, Twenty Questions* and *The Archers*. Or hearing her voice rise in pitch and volume and decrease in speed and sense when the telephone had rung and she had hurried through to the booth in the hall to answer it. I swear it is less than five years since I last heard her say down the line in her kindest clear-and-slow-for-foreigners voice:

'If you are in a call-box, press button B . . .'

Buttons A and B must have vanished from payphones twenty years ago.

That is my image of infancy. Just me, glowing in the combined warmth of the gas fire, my big-bellied mother and her Ferguson wireless. If it felt in a sociable mood, our Siamese cat would join us, but in my memory we are alone. Sometimes we will get up, my mother stretching, hands on hips and, after she has found a headscarf and a raincoat, we will leave the house. We visit the hairdresser's, the Home and Colonial Stores, the Post Office, and finally Quell's where I noisily hoover up a raspberry milkshake while my mother closes her eyes in bliss as she spoons in a melon or tomato sorbet. On the way back we feed stale crusts to the ducks in the park. All the way there and back, she will talk to me. Tell me things. What words mean. Why cars have number-plates. How she met Daddy. Why she must go into hospital soon to have a baby. She makes up stories about a koala called Bananas. In one adventure Bananas comes to England to visit relations at Whipsnade for Christmas and suffers terribly because of the cold, the foolish animal having packed only his shorts, swimming trunks and

sandals in the expectation that Buckinghamshire would be boiling hot in December. I giggle, as we children do, at the stupidity of those who don't know things that we have only just been taught ourselves.

Life has been downhill ever since. Or do I mean uphill?

As we reach Stanley Avenue, we race for the house and, pregnant as she is, Mother always *nearly* wins. She was athletic at school and kept goal for the England schoolgirls' hockey team.

There were *au pair* girls at Chesham, German or Scandiwegian usually, there was Mrs Worrell who scrubbed, there was Roger and in the evenings, there was the terrifying prospect of Father. But in my memory there is Mother at the typewriter (once she loudly said 'fuck' forgetting I was under her chair) and there is me, gazing into the blue and orange flames.

One morning I was off school, whether shamming or genuinely sick I can't remember. Mother came into my bedroom, hands wearily pressed against hips, and told me that the time had come for her to go into hospital. Roger had once attempted to tell me how pregnancy came about. One or both of us became a little confused and the picture in my head was that of my father as a kind of gardener, dropping a small seed into my mother's tummy-button and watering it with his pee. A peculiar image I suppose, but to a race of Martians no stranger than the unwieldy truth.

The upshot of all this was a baby girl, Joanna. Her middle name Roselle came from my mother's own Viennese mother. It became my particular joy to help feed and dress this new sister and my most burning ambition to be the first person she smiled at.

I was now officially a middle child.

The next week we left Chesham and headed for Norfolk.

2

It is January 1965. Roger, who is eight, has returned to Stouts Hill for his second term. I am considered a spot too young. I am due to follow him in the summer so in the meantime I attend for one time-marking term a Church of England primary school in the village of Cawston, a mile from our new house in Booton.

Cawston Primary School was run by John Kett, descended from Kett of Kett's Rebellion, the Kett who ended his days hanging from chains on the ramparts of Norwich Castle. The twentieth-century descendant is a kindly figure who writes books on Norfolk dialect and is much loved and looked up to by everyone for miles around. Whether he shares his noisome ancestor's belief in eastern independence I could not say, but I am certain that were today's fashion for devolution to be continued into the ancient kingdoms of England, he would be a very natural candidate for King of Anglia – perhaps with Delia Smith as his consort.

'I need a volunteer,' Miss Meddlar said one day.

My hand shot up. 'Oh, Miss, me Miss! Please Miss!'

'Very well, Stephen Fry.' Miss Meddlar always called me by both names. It is one of my chief memories of primary school, that of being Stephen Fry all the time. I suppose Miss Meddlar felt first names were too informal and surnames too cold and too affected for a decent, Christian village school.