

**OUTSIDE
SHAKESPEARE**

A Memoir

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INTRODUCTION

We must have seemed a thoroughly typical nuclear family of the time, those years after the second world war. Mum, Dad, my elder brother Ivor and me. Naturally only Dad went out to work while Mum stayed at home in the traditional role of housewife and mother. Granny came to live with us for the last seven years of her life, so, to be strictly accurate, there were five of us, not four. And then, Dad was eventually killed in a car accident, and, later still, Ivor was murdered. So, for these reasons at least, you'd have to say we weren't in the end that typical.

Misfortune is not enough to justify a memoir. Our parents died close together during the 1970s, and neither event, not even Dad's violent end, prompted the urge to write. That came only after Ivor's death twenty years further on.

As many people do, he kept his life in compartments. I occupied one of them and from childhood onwards saw no more of him than he wanted me to. He was always elusive, unreachable; he recedes as I approach, even now. Much of his life was hidden, and loneliness was bred deep into him. Part of the instinct for self-concealment stemmed from his homosexuality, which was off-limits to most people including me, and neither of us referred to it let alone discussed it. His death, though, changed everything, and one of its effects is that though I still can't see the whole picture, at least more of it is visible. The sad uncomfortable truth is that I know him better now that he is dead, better than when he was alive, and better indeed than I ever would have known him if he had lived. I can also start to see an answer to the question of why his life took the direction it did and what caused it to end so tragically.

The original plan was that Ivor would be centre stage and the rest of the family somewhat indistinct figures at the back - not quite spear-carriers but not much more either. But it didn't take long to realise this wasn't going to work, and with each revision every member of our not very large family was moving further down stage, out of the shadows. Families make us what we are, and we all affect each other. One reason I was initially reluctant to acknowledge this truism was that it meant that, as his younger

brother, I too had been part of what shaped his life. I was now forced to think about how I'd contributed to the large empty space that had always existed between us. Each re-writing was starting to involve everyone. It's easy to see how our parents affected us; it's much more difficult, more of an unexpected challenge, to look at the situation in reverse and consider how we in turn may have affected them. That thought opened the door to the larger question: how did *all* of us impact on one other? - Mum on Dad, Dad on me, me on Ivor, Ivor on Mum, Dad on Ivor, me on Mum, and so on. It was turning into a complicated study of family dynamics, involving the attempt to look at the world through the eyes of each of us as separate individuals, in order to gain a sense of what George Eliot called everyone's "equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference."

Some aspects of this project would be easier to fill in than others. Those that involved me would obviously provide more material than, to take one example, the relationship between Dad and Ivor where, so far as I could see, for much of their lives they seemed to have little relationship of any kind. I haven't dealt with the four of us as discrete individuals living a life independent of the others. In our parents' case, they mostly didn't have one, though Ivor and I were luckier in this respect and by the time we were in our twenties we'd each started to create an identity separate from us-as-part-of-the-family. I was probably the more successful because I managed to get further away. To Australia in fact. But the family dominated all our lives. Even when Ivor and I were no longer living at home, its centripetal force constantly tugged us back.

Any family, even one as inward-looking and claustrophobic as ours, bears the imprint of a particular time and place, and for us that meant lower-middle class England in the decades before and after the second world war. Both Ivor and I were a product of this social background, absorbing many of its values and attitudes, and - bizarre as it may sound, though towards the end of this memoir I try to show why - in Ivor's case those values contributed to his death. The search for an explanation of what happened to him took me, finally, into another realm altogether. It seemed to me that he was, in some sense, fated. I

don't mean there was some mysterious family curse at work behind the violent death of, after all, not one but two of its members. Dad's death has never troubled me in this respect; it was a horrible accident, no less but no more. But in Ivor's case I'm not sure that something else wasn't working itself out, propelling him insidiously to his end. Even now I'm reluctant to dismiss as mere imagination what came to me so powerfully at the time and has stayed with me ever since.

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Trying to retrieve events and circumstances long past means having to deal with the unreliability of memory. I've tried to be scrupulous about what I am sure of and what I'm not, and if a particular recollection seems suspect I say so. There is almost no dialogue in what follows, because like most people I wouldn't be able to recall the details of a conversation from yesterday, not verbatim at least, let alone one that took place half a century ago. Though some vivid scraps have survived in my memory unaltered, to go beyond them would have tipped over into fiction. Wherever possible, the incompleteness of memory and its possible distortions have been supplemented by independent testimony; and so I've drawn on diaries and other documentary material, as well as the recollections of friends and other family members.

One final element interspersed in this mix of family analysis, social history and metaphysical search is the occasional use of literary quotations and references. These are more than just the overspill from a working life spent as a teacher of English. Some have to be present because they form part of the story; and the rest are there in the hope that, as literature is supposed to do, they shed their own oblique light on the narrative.

Back to Ivor.

It's *not* his death I grieve for; it's his *life*. This is what I tried to explain to people, after I'd learned from the police and others just what he had gone through. Even the very manner of his death seemed somehow less awful than everything that had preceded it, the life that he had endured, of which until then I had been almost wholly ignorant. But that was not all. There was something else, deeper, more painful, and much harder to put into

words, however sympathetic the listener. If Ivor had been killed in other circumstances, it wouldn't have affected me anything like as much. If a mugger had stabbed him in the street to get his wallet, it would have been equally dreadful. But that could happen to anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time. It would have been no more than an accident of circumstances. Accidents are random. By themselves they signify nothing. Sod's law maybe; that's about it. But the point about Ivor's death is that it wasn't random.

Why is it not a tragedy if someone just falls under a bus? I would ask my students this question during their Shakespeare course, inviting and often receiving the retort, especially from my Australian students, "It is if it's you under the bus." The idea was to set off a discussion about the distinction between tragedy as the term is ordinarily used and tragedy as literary form where accident is merely one element among others - character, fate, free will, society, and so on. Tragedy, like all art, involves some form of pattern making as part of the search for meaning. Accident alone has no meaning.

Ivor's death was emphatically not a case of sod's law. He knew his attacker, and that fact changes everything; there was a history there, motivation, a chain of circumstances, something not just arbitrary but capable of being understood, partly at least. But the implications of his death went further. Too many of the circumstances surrounding it were instantly recognisable to me, and they completed a much larger pattern. His death was more than a tragedy in the ordinary sense of the word. It was a tragedy in the literary sense as well. But the pattern didn't fit any of the templates of Shakespearean tragedy - and not just because of Ivor's unheroic ordinariness. His whole life, from childhood to the moment of his death, formed a clear and unbroken arc; and that is not how Shakespeare's tragedies work. Ivor's life and death frankly looked too diagrammatic, too fearsomely carved out and consciously articulated, to be Shakespearean.

This claim is not offered as a fanciful embellishment to the essence of the matter, which is that he had met an undeserved and brutal end. But, far from being fanciful, it is what touched me most strongly at the time and has had the most lasting effect. It is why I was horrified and distraught at his death regardless of the fact that we had never been close. In Wordsworth's poem "The

Ruined Cottage” the narrator is deeply affected by the story of the life and death of a young woman he had never even met. He concludes with the briefly eloquent phrase, “I blessed her in the impotence of grief”, accepting that she was now beyond any comfort he might want to offer her. In a similar way, all I can do for Ivor is write down what I know about the person he was and what he went through. The feelings generated by his death are inevitably less intense now. But it became clear in writing this memoir that what took place has implications not just for him but for the rest of his family, and some of the residual sadness is for all of us.