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Down the Line with a Smile
Shadowing Vladimir Nabokov

A memoir

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To Yvonne

Were it offered to my choice, I should have no objection to a repetition of the same life from its beginning, only asking the advantages authors have in a second edition to correct some faults of the first (...). Since no such repetition is to be expected, the next thing most like living one's life over again seems to be a recollection of that life, and to make that recollection as durable as possible by putting it down in writing.

Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*

Part I

Chapter 1

Did My Parents Bungle Me?

“I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me”, laments Tristram Shandy in the opening lines of his autobiography, claiming that all the setbacks, calamities and reversals of fortune he has had to put up with in his life were directly or indirectly the result of his parents’ ill-advised behavior the day they engendered him in the course of their monthly coupling – a mishap he heard about through his Uncle Toby who was little conversant with such matters.

I am tempted to address a similar blame to my late parents.

Few of us have the privilege of knowing the circumstances of their conception though it is an event of much import which we occasionally muse upon but few ever have the gall to question our parents about. Was the momentous affair triggered by a local event or an international catastrophe? Like the departure of the father for the war or his return, or a huge power breakdown like the one in 2003 in New York which was followed nine months later by a spate of births. Circumstances

which unavoidably might have had an impact on the mood of the conceivers and on the psychological and physiological complexion of the conceived.

Walter Shandy, a true philosopher endowed with solid common sense, fulminates at some point in the presence of Laurence Sterne's persona, Yorick, against the damning silence accompanying the conception of a human being: "I know it will be said (...) that in itself, and simply taken—like hunger, or thirst, or sleep—'tis an affair neither good or bad—or shameful or otherwise.—Why then did the delicacy of Diogenes and Plato so recalcitrate against it? and wherefore, when we go about to make and plant a man, do we put out the candle? and for what reason is it, that all the parts thereof—the congre-dients—the preparations—the instruments, and whatever serves thereto, are so held as to be conveyed to a cleanly mind by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever?" It was the case in pre-Victorian England, it remains the case in twenty-first-century UK, France, the United States and, for all I know China and even Bhutan – allegedly the happiest country in the world. A silence all the more shocking nowadays as miscellaneous acts of copulation, masturbation, lesbianism, etc. etc., are made available to all and sundry on the Internet with a simple click.

Perhaps we are afraid of emulating the ill manners of both wild and domestic animals that usually pay no heed to bystanders when indulging themselves. Georges Bataille, a French philosopher and a great admirer of de Sade, claimed that "nobody disputes the fact that the sexual act is ugly." Only a sadomasochist can hold such a view.

The primary cause of Tristram's misconception, come to think of it, is not only his parents' clumsy behavior but a comparatively new invention at the time, the Grandfather Clock. Fifty years before his birth, this homely timepiece was

not part of the furniture in the residence of a burger like his father. It owed its existence to a sophisticated mechanism conceived (*c'est le cas de le dire*) in 1658 by one Robert Hooke, a natural philosopher and polymath says Wikipedia, the anchor escapement which, explains the same resourceful encyclopedia in tickling terms, “maintains the swing of the pendulum by giving it a small push each swing, and allows the clock’s wheels to advance a fixed amount with each swing”.

This mechanism made possible the invention of the Grandfather Clock and is indirectly responsible for launching Tristram’s entertaining story: “Pray my Dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?—Good G...! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,—Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question? Pray, what was your father saying? —Nothing.”

Nothing indeed!

Walter Shandy, who by then had gamely managed to bestir his carnal energy and was about to achieve his timid explosion, spilled on the unwelcome mat part of what Mrs. Shandy would have licensed him as usual “to take indoors”, to misquote another inventive novelist, Adam Von Librikov, alias Vivian Darkbloom, alias Vladimir Sirin-Nabokov, the writer I have been shadowing for over fifty years.

Having never had any Uncle Toby around me, I have no way to tell if my good or bad fortunes were due to the circumstances of the fructiferous coupling of my parents one night in September 1938. It is the very opportuneness of the act I object to. Had they postponed their coupling a few weeks or a few months, I might have been born with a totally different complexion, psychologically I mean: the moon and the stars, which are supposed to have a bearing on your cocktail of genes, could have spared me the trouble of being born under

the sign of the crab like Proust, also born on a tenth of July. The crab always has a strange hold on your unconscious and imagination. I mightn't feel so redundant, superfluous, and expendable if I had been born weeks later under the sign of the lion.

There is one thing I know for sure about the circumstances in which I was conceived: my mother willed me to life, contrary to some of my siblings, so she told me. Having given birth to three children in the first four years of her married life, she asked a priest who was hearing her confession in the late thirties if there was a way for her to avoid getting pregnant the very instant she stopped breast-feeding a baby. I don't know how she, who never uttered a word closely or remotely related to sex, voiced or intimated her request to the priest pressing his ear behind the grille. A young priest, she said, who, though celibate, understood what she meant. He didn't tell her to pray God that she could stop ovulating – a little early for a thirty-one-year-old mother –, nor that she should plead with my father, my hot-blooded father, that he either refrain from making love to her or pull out before it was too late. The latter palliative was prohibited by the Church who held that the spermatic liquid was too sacred and precious to be squandered out of doors.

Let's keep the priest's charitable explanation on hold for a moment and say a few words about my father, named Maurice like me. He was christened Daniel, so says the church register. Why did my grand-parents, who had first chosen to give him the name of a lion-tamer, later changed their minds? Was there a disagreement between my grand-mother Louise and my grand-father Basile on the subject? They probably knew who the biblical Daniel was, but I bet they had no idea that Saint Maurice was a soldier who, rather than relinquishing his Catholic faith, preferred to become a martyr and lost his

head as a result. That's my father to a tee. He was a staunch believer and a tough fighter, even though, thanks to me or rather to himself and my mother, he never had the opportunity to test his mettle during the impending war – a father of four children couldn't be inducted into the army – and was too young during the previous one.

He wasn't a saint and he knew it. Before marrying my mother in 1931, he had led a younger and prettier girl, Berthe, to the altar at an unusual hour, six a.m. Not that the young couple sought to hide the fact that they had played the beast with two backs before receiving the priest's blessing. It was their parents who had insisted that they get married at this ungodly hour to punish them for dishonoring their families. The church bells probably didn't ring that morning but everybody was up already milking the cows or having breakfast and witnessed or heard of their disgrace. Hence my poor father's lifelong sense of guilt which assumed a tragic dimension when at Niort hospital six months later he heard Berthe's horrendous screams as she was desperately trying to birth their dead baby.

Sadly, he left the hospital childless and a widower!

That wasn't exactly the story he and mother had told us, though. We knew he had married a first time. On All Saints' Day, we would occasionally accompany him to the churchyard in Saint-Maurice-des-Noues and stand with him in front of Berthe's grave, surprised to see him shed a few tears on the fate of this young girl whom, obviously, he had dearly loved. Yet, nobody had ever told us about the true circumstances of Berthe's death, nor, of course, that they had married at six o'clock in the church next to that same churchyard. Father had occasionally mentioned screams he had heard at the hospital, but he had never confided that the screams were those of his dying bride. That's what we understood only after his and mother's death when cousin Maurice Bobineau, father's

nephew and godson, handed to us a photograph of the young couple taken by a professional photographer.

On this sepia photograph now in front of me, Berthe seems to be trying to smile but somehow can't manage it. She is very pretty with her round face and short hair and looks a little like Nabokov's first love, Valentina Shulgina, the Tamar of his autobiography. Aunt Marthe, cousin Maurice's late mother and father's elder sister, had asked her son to give us this photograph after our parents' death and to furnish us with all the details of the sad story. Apparently, everybody in the parishes around knew that story but nobody ever mentioned it to us. People assumed perhaps that we already knew.

This photograph, an emblem of a family secret, reminds me of the one Paul Auster stumbled upon after his father's death, a family portrait "torn down in the middle and then clumsily mended, leaving one of the trees in the background hanging eerily in mid-air", says the author in *The Invention of Solitude*. The second time he looked at it, he realized something was missing: "I saw a man's fingertips grasping the torso of one of my uncles; I saw, very distinctly, that another of my uncles was not resting his hand on his brother's back, as I had first thought, but against a chair that was not there. And then I realized what was strange about the picture: my grandfather had been cut out of it." Knowing by then that his grandmother had killed her husband, allegedly in a fit of madness, he suddenly understood that she had eliminated her husband a second time: "The whole thing made me shake", he concludes. The oval photograph of my young father with his pretty bride didn't make me shake. It filled me with pity and sadness for him who had suffered a dire tragedy eleven years before my birth.

I have kept my sinless mother waiting too long in her confessional. She had obviously availed herself of the pres-

ence of this young priest in the parish to ask for advice. Never could she have addressed such a plea to her usual confessor, our vicar, Father Bénéteau, a former missionary with the unsophisticated faith of a soldier who, in his brief sermons, kept terrorizing his flock with images of fire and brimstone. She would have known in advance what his answer would be: “You must bear all the children God gives you.” After the war, I heard him petition his parishioners from the pulpit to give many children to the nation – as cannon fodder, perhaps! I’ll have other occasions to talk about him.

The nameless young priest partly responsible for my being born when I was born recommended to my mother a comparatively new form of contraception named after a Japanese gynecologist, Dr. Kyosaku Ogino, born Nakamura. He had developed a method to compute the fertile and infertile periods of the menstrual cycle, a method later expanded by an Austrian gynecologist, Herman Knaus, who had only limited confidence in it. It led to many unwanted pregnancies. The female partner was expected to have the mind of an accountant coupled with that of a scrivener, plus a clockwork menstrual cycle, judging from the computation offered by Wikipedia: “To find the estimated length of the pre-ovulatory infertile phase, nineteen (19) is subtracted from the length of the woman’s shortest cycle. To find the estimated start of the post-ovulatory infertile phase, ten (10) is subtracted from the length of the woman’s longest cycle. A woman whose menstrual cycles ranged in length from 30 to 36 days would be estimated to be infertile for the first 11 days of her cycle ($30-19=11$), to be fertile on days 12-25, and to resume infertility on day 26 ($36-10=26$). When used to avoid pregnancy, the rhythm method has a perfect-use failure rate of up to 9% per year.” The method had a further inconvenience when the woman was married to a hot-blooded husband and had to keep him from carnally

knowing her for days on end. I don't know in what terms the priest presented Ogino's method but my mother understood the gist of it and adopted it with success.

Did she, during the fall of 1938, tell my father that she was ready or eager to have another baby and invite him to get me started? Or did she, one day she had read some suggestive episode in one of her many sentimental novels and felt a twinge in her womb, indulge my pressing father and allow him to plant a baby in her, to borrow Tristram's lingo? I bet he never kept count and never consulted her perplexing and frustrating calendar. The expression she used when she confided that she had wanted me, "*je t'ai voulu*", lends me to think that she didn't inform him he was planting for good. She may have feared that he would be less passionate and less generous with his life juice, having himself probably no desire for another child to care for and no wish to face the many vexations of a new pregnancy. She was doing it for his own good, though: his fourth child was going to spare him the trouble of joining the army and spending four years in a P.O.W. camp in Germany like many of his improvident neighbors.

This is the closest I can get to the circumstances of my start in life without unduly snooping on my progenitors. My mother took advantage of my father, harvesting his life juice to make a baby for herself.

I may have been half mistaken when I opened my story with that quotation from *Tristram Shandy*. It isn't against both of my parents I should hold a grievance but against her. It is largely her fault if, for me, body and spirit, body and soul as the priests used to say, have all too frequently been at loggerheads. My body owes everything to my father. When I look at myself in the mirror these days, I feel that I am beginning to look more and more like him when he was my age, eighty plus. He was Eros' sidekick, and so am I, except that I have

never faced dishonor for letting myself be carried away by my imagination and sexual desires. It is to my mother that I owe my book-nutty spirit laced as it is with a strong measure of narcissism and mental unrest. I am split in my ontological middle, hence my impression of being redundant and never in the right place, either in society or on the page.

This excursion into my prehistory has taught me something about myself. Not that it gives me great comfort.

By the same author

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