

Nineteen fifty-one was an eventful, and in some ways painful, year. My Auntie Birdie, who had been a constant presence in my life, died in March; she had lived with us for my entire lifetime and was unconditionally loving to us all. (Birdie was a tiny woman and of modest intelligence, the only one so handicapped among my mother's siblings. It was never quite clear to me what had happened to her in early life; there was talk of a head injury in infancy but also of a congenital thyroid deficiency. None of this mattered to us; she was simply Auntie Birdie, an essential part of the family.) I was greatly affected by Birdie's death and perhaps only then realized how deeply she was woven into my life, all our lives. When, a few months before, I got a scholarship to Oxford, it was Birdie who gave me the telegram and hugged and congratulated me—shedding some tears, too, because she knew this meant that I, the youngest of her nephews, would be leaving home.

I was due to go to Oxford in late summer. I had just turned eighteen, and my father thought this was the time for a serious man-to-man, father-to-son talk with me. We talked about allowances and money—not a big issue, for I was fairly frugal in my habits and my only extravagance was books. And then my father got on to what was really worrying him.

“You don't seem to have many girlfriends,” he said. “Don't you like girls?”

“They're all right,” I answered, wishing the conversation would stop.

“Perhaps you prefer boys?” he persisted.

“Yes, I do—but it's just a feeling—I have never ‘done’ anything,” and then I added, fearfully, “Don't tell Ma—she won't be able to take it.”

But my father did tell her, and the next morning she came down with a

face of thunder, a face I had never seen before. “You are an abomination,” she said. “I wish you had never been born.” Then she left and did not speak to me for several days. When she did speak, there was no reference to what she had said (nor did she ever refer to the matter again), but something had come between us. My mother, so open and supportive in most ways, was harsh and inflexible in this area. A Bible reader like my father, she loved the Psalms and the Song of Solomon but was haunted by the terrible verses in Leviticus: “Thou shall not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.”

My parents, as physicians, had many medical books, including several on “sexual pathology,” and I had dipped into Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Havelock Ellis by the age of twelve. But I found it difficult to feel that I had a “condition,” that my identity could be reduced to a name or a diagnosis. My friends at school knew that I was “different,” if only because I excused myself from parties which would end in petting and necking.

Buried in chemistry and then in biology, I was not too aware of what was going on all around me—or inside me—and I had no crushes on anyone at school (although I was turned on by a full-size reproduction, at the head of the stairway, of the famous statue of a beautifully muscled, naked Laocoön trying to save his sons from the serpents). I knew that the very idea of homosexuality aroused horror in some people; I suspected that this might be the case with my mother, which is why I said to my father, “Don’t tell Ma—she won’t be able to take it.” I should not, perhaps, have told my father; in general, I regarded my sexuality as nobody’s business but my own, not a secret, but not to be talked about. My closest friends, Eric and Jonathan, were aware of it, but we almost never discussed the subject. Jonathan said that he regarded me as “asexual.”

We are all creatures of our upbringings, our cultures, our times. And I have needed to remind myself, repeatedly, that my mother was born in the 1890s and had an Orthodox upbringing and that in England in the 1950s homosexual behavior was treated not only as a perversion but as a criminal offense. I have to remember, too, that sex is one of those areas—like religion and politics—where otherwise decent and rational people may have intense, irrational feelings. My mother did not mean to be cruel, to wish me dead. She was suddenly overwhelmed, I now realize, and she probably regretted her words or perhaps partitioned them off in a closeted part of her mind.

But her words haunted me for much of my life and played a major part in inhibiting and injecting with guilt what should have been a free and joyous expression of sexuality.

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**M**y brother David and his wife, Lili, learning of my lack of sexual experience, felt it could be attributed to shyness and that a good woman, even a good fuck, could set me to rights. Around Christmas of 1951, after my first term at Oxford, they took me to Paris with the intention not only of seeing the sights—the Louvre, Notre Dame, the Eiffel Tower—but of taking me to a kindly whore who would put me through my paces, skillfully and patiently teaching me what sex was like.

A prostitute of suitable age and character was selected—David and Lili interviewed her first, explaining the situation—and I then went into her room. I was so frightened that my penis became limp with fear and my testicles tried to retreat into my abdominal cavity.

The prostitute, who resembled one of my aunts, saw the situation at a glance. She spoke good English (this had been one of the criteria for her selection), and she said, “Don’t worry—we’ll have a nice cup of tea instead.” She pulled out tea things and petits fours, put on a kettle, and asked what sort of tea I liked. “Lapsang,” I said. “I love the smoky smell.” By this time, I had recovered my voice and my confidence and chatted easily with her as we enjoyed our smoky tea.

I stayed for half an hour, then left; my brother and his wife were waiting, expectantly, outside. “How was it, Oliver?” David demanded. “Terrific,” I said, wiping crumbs off my beard.

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**B**y the time I was fourteen, it was “understood” that I was going to be a doctor. My mother and father were both physicians, and so were my two eldest brothers.

I was not sure, however, that I wanted to be a doctor. I could no longer nourish ambitions to be a chemist; chemistry itself had advanced beyond the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century inorganic chemistry I loved so much. But at fourteen or fifteen, inspired by my school biology teacher and

by Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, I thought I would like to become a marine biologist.

When I got my scholarship to Oxford, I faced a choice: Should I stick to zoology or become a pre-med student and do anatomy, biochemistry, and physiology? It was especially the physiology of the senses that fascinated me—how did we see color, depth, movement? How did we *recognize* anything? How did we make sense of the world, visually? I had developed these interests from an early age through having visual migraines, for besides the brilliant zigzags which heralded an attack, I might, during a migraine aura, lose the sense of color or depth or movement or even the ability to recognize anything. My vision could be unmade, deconstructed, frighteningly but fascinatingly, in front of me, and then be remade, reconstructed, all in the space of a few minutes.

My little home chemistry lab had doubled as a photography darkroom, and I was especially drawn to color and stereophotography; these too made me wonder how the brain constructed color and depth. I had enjoyed marine biology much as I had enjoyed chemistry, but now I wanted to understand how the human brain worked.

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I never had much intellectual self-confidence, even though I was regarded as bright. Like my two closest school friends, Jonathan Miller and Eric Korn, I was obsessed with both science and literature. I was in awe of Jonathan's and Eric's intelligence and couldn't think why they hung around with me, but we all got scholarships to university. I then ran into some difficulties.

At Oxford, one had to take an exam called "prelims" for entry; it was considered a mere formality with me, because I already had an open scholarship. But I failed prelims; I took them a second time, and I failed again. I took the test a third time and failed yet again, and at this point Mr. Jones, the Provost, pulled me aside and said, "You did splendid scholarship papers, Sacks. Why are you failing this silly exam again and again?" I said I didn't know, and he said, "Well, this is your last chance." So I took the test a fourth time and finally passed.

At St. Paul's School, with Eric and Jonathan, I could enjoy an easy mix of arts and sciences. I was president of our literary society and secretary of the

Field Club at the same time. Such a mix was more difficult at Oxford, for the anatomy department, the science laboratories, and the Radcliffe Science Library were all clustered together in South Parks Road, at a distance from the university lecture halls and colleges. There was both a physical and a social separation between those of us doing science or pre-med degrees and the rest of the university.

I felt this sharply in my first term at Oxford. We had to write essays and present these to our tutors, and this entailed many hours in the Radcliffe Science Library, reading research and review papers, culling what seemed most important, and presenting it in an interesting and individual way. Spending a great deal of time reading neurophysiology was enjoyable, even thrilling—vast new areas seemed to be opening out—but I became more and more conscious of what was now missing from my life. I was doing almost no general reading other than Maynard Keynes's *Essays in Biography*, and I wanted to write my own "Essays in Biography," though with a clinical twist—essays presenting individuals with unusual weaknesses or strengths and showing the influence of these special features on their lives; they would, in short, be clinical biographies or case histories of a sort.

My first (and, in the event, my only) subject here was Theodore Hook, whose name I had come across while reading a biography of Sydney Smith, the great early Victorian wit. Hook too was a great wit and conversationalist, a decade or two earlier than Sydney Smith; he also had, to an unrivaled degree, powers of musical invention. It was said that he had composed more than five hundred operas, sitting at a piano, improvising, and singing all of the parts. These were flowers of the moment—astonishing, beautiful, and ephemeral; they were improvised on the spot, never repeated, never written down, and soon forgotten. I was enthralled by descriptions of Hook's improvisational genius; what sort of brain could allow for this?

I started reading what I could about Hook, as well as some of the books he had written; they seemed oddly dull and labored, in contrast to descriptions of his lightning-quick, wildly inventive improvisations. I thought about Hook a good deal, and towards the end of the Michaelmas term I wrote an essay on him, an essay which ran to six closely typed foolscap pages, four or five thousand words in all.

I recently found this essay in a box, along with other early writings.

Reading it, I am struck by its fluency, its erudition, its pomposity, and its pretentiousness. It does not seem like my writing. Could I have cribbed the entire thing or stitched it together from half a dozen sources, or was it in fact my own writing, couched in a learned, professorial style which I had adopted to counter the fact that I was a callow eighteen-year-old?

Hook was a diversion; most of my essays were on physiological subjects and were to be read weekly to my tutor. When I took on the subject of hearing, I got so excited by this, did so much reading and thinking, that I did not actually have time to write my essay. But on the day of my presentation, I brought in a pad of paper and pretended to read from it, turning over the pages as I extemporized on the subject. At one point, Carter (Dr. C. W. Carter, my tutor at Queen's) stopped me.

"I didn't quite follow that," he said. "Could you read it again?" A little nervously, I tried to repeat the last couple of sentences. Carter looked puzzled. "Let me see it," he said. I handed him the blank pad. "Remarkable, Sacks," he said. "Very remarkable. But in future, I want you to *write* your essays."