Prologue

This book is the story of thirty people, almost all from a single street in South London. They are selected from one hundred individuals and households studied over seventeen months by myself and Fiona Parrott, a PhD student in my discipline of Anthropology. It is also a book about how people express themselves through their possessions, and what these tell us about their lives. It explores the role of objects in our relationships, both to each other and to ourselves. We live today in a world of ever more stuff – what sometimes seems a deluge of goods and shopping. We tend to assume that this has two results: that we are more superficial, and that we are more materialistic, our relationships to things coming at the expense of our relationships to people. We make such assumptions, we speak in clichés, but we have rarely tried to put these assumptions to the test. By the time you finish this book you will discover that, in many ways, the opposite is true; that possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer our relationships are with people. This is why the first two portraits are called 'Empty' and 'Full'.

The diversity of contemporary London is extraordinary, and begs to be better understood. But, increasingly, people's lives take place behind the closed doors of private houses. How can we gain an insight into what those lives are like today: people's feelings, frustrations, aspirations,

tragedies and delights? Not television characters, not celebrities, but real people. How could one ever come to know such things about perfect strangers? We could try and knock on doors and ask to talk with them, to hear their stories. If you can persuade them you are not selling anything, not Jehovah's Witnesses, they might let you in – they did let us in. But asking people about themselves is by no means straightforward. English people, in particular, often seem embarrassed by direct questions about their intimate lives and relationships. Sometimes people from other countries embarrass us in turn, by gushing forth these detailed accounts of their lives. Yet often you feel you are listening to a script; something readily prepared for such an encounter. They sound as much a justification or self-therapy as an account. Language is often defensive, restricted and carefully constructed as narrative. You can ask people about themselves, but the results are often much less informative than one would like.

This book takes you on a different route towards this goal. The questions were not only put directly to the people who opened their doors. We also put our questions to the interior of the house. We asked what decorations hung on the walls, what the people who greeted us were wearing, what we were asked to sit on, what style of bathroom we peed in, whose photographs were on display, what collections were arrayed on mantelpieces. This might seem a rather absurd thing to do. How can one ask questions of things that cannot speak for themselves?

Objects surely don't talk. Or do they? The person in that living-room gives an account of themselves by responding to questions. But every object in that room is equally a form by which they have chosen to express themselves. They put up ornaments; they laid down carpets. They selected furnishing and got dressed that morning. Some things may be gifts or objects retained from the past, but they have decided to live with them, to place them in lines or higgledy-piggledy; they made the room minimalist or crammed to the gills. These things are not a random collection. They have been gradually accumulated as an expression of that person or household. Surely if we can learn to listen to these things we have access to an authentic other voice. Yes, also contrived, but in a different way from that of language. I don't pretend to be Sherlock Holmes or Poirot, let alone CSI sleuthing for clues to solve a puzzle. The detectives and forensics tend to look at the inadvertent,

while in this book I feel I am paying proper respect to that which some people have themselves crafted as patiently as any artist, as an outward expression of themselves. The original painters of these portraits are the people who appear in this book.

And what pictures they painted. Our only hypothesis in starting this work was that we had no idea what we would find on this entirely ordinary-looking street. This proved correct. Could I have imagined that one morning we would meet a man who was responsible for the death of dozens of innocent people, and, on the very same afternoon, a woman who had fostered dozens of the most deprived children of the area? I didn't expect to participate in the most charmed Christmas since *Fanny and Alexander*, or to hear how a CD collection helped someone overcome heroin. I didn't know you could find vintage Fisher Price toys on eBay or expect to hear such a convincing paean to the wonderful world of McDonald's Happy Meals. I had no reason to see a logical connection between a laptop and the customs of Australian Aboriginals. I hadn't thought of Estonia as an outer London suburb, or understood the potential of tattoos for controlling memory. I had no reason to expect this ordinary London street to include such sexual exhibitionism, or the tyranny of Feng Shui. I didn't know one could care for a dog with quite such tenderness, or really find life starting at sixty. I hadn't registered quite how devastating divorce can be for children; I had underestimated the vast range of objects that people collect and why exactly they collect them. I wouldn't have guessed that teaching sociology might fit well with wrestling, or anticipated that image of goats looking amazed at basketball champions. I hadn't predicted that I would get such an opportunity to share my affection for John Peel, or learn about prostitutes and custard. Above all, I sort of expected, but couldn't really fully imagine, the sadness of lives and the comfort of things.

This is also a book about Londoners. The people of London deserve something better than the categories we generally use to describe them. London is unprecedented. Never before have so many people from such diverse backgrounds been free to mix, and not to mix, in close proximity to each other. At first this was described in terms of Londoners and others: the multi-culturalism of the Greater London Council; the recognition of specific populations from the Caribbean or South Asia. But London today has moved well beyond ethnic minorities. Indeed, it was

even then the case that the Londoner next door might have been from Greece or the United States. Yes, there is a huge increase in people from Eastern Europe, but the neighbour today might also be from South Korea, Brazil or South Africa as well as Irish, Pakistani or Jewish. Maybe it is better to start by seeing the typical London household as a Norwegian married to an Algerian. What, then, is typical? What can lead us beyond such categories?

Nor is this just a problem concerned with place of birth. Gender isn't what it used to be. Being gay came to form another minority, but this labelling, too, fails to do justice to the range of people we meet. There are quite a few gay people present in this book, but it wasn't clear by the end that they had a whole lot in common other than being gay. Similarly with class; one man seemed to convey the stereotype of a masculine worker propping up the bar at the pub; who would have little in common with an acupuncturist; and yet it was the latter who turned out to come from working-class Romford, while the former was doing summer work while at university. Categories create assumptions. But older people now want to keep on clubbing, middle classes have an affectation for cockney. Is that the *au pair* or your wife?

Nevertheless, London is most definitely not a free for all. People may still suffer from crushing constraints. Class can still be a creature of limited educational possibilities. People are still stereotyped by racism. Men and women still make derogatory remarks and have problematic expectations about each other. But still, London seems to be a place where people can confound and confuse expectations, and for me, observing London, perhaps the healthiest option is to acknowledge generalisations and categories when they emerge, but to at least try and not to start from these. Because it just may be that the generalisations emerge best, not from place of origin or gender, but around an orientation to science or celebrity, gardening or church.

This book is an experiment designed to find people without recourse to such categories. Not to research them by picking them in the first place as tokens of 'man', 'Asian', or 'working class'. Instead, this book has acknowledged and exploited the unprecedented nature of modern London. That not just a few streets, but most streets today contain a mixture of homes – some, housing association; some, privately owned; big houses divided into maisonettes; and some smaller houses being

gentrified. That where migrants once settled in particular areas, they have now tended to disperse widely. And because most people can't even tell you the names of their neighbours, there is little pressure to homogenise around a neighbourhood. So this book is about a random street that I had no reason to choose. It was undertaken in that liberal spirit of taking people as you find them and letting them emerge as they would.

To do that, we had to pick one random street in the first place, and then try to persuade the people to let you into their homes. This wasn't easy, but, by dint of spending seventeen months on a single street, we reached our goal of one hundred individuals and households and had only eight final refusals, providing what may be as close to a genuine slice of London as one is ever going to reach. In fact the street turned out to match well our lack of expectations. Only twenty-three per cent were actually born in London, and there were no minorities more significant than any others. People came from everywhere and anywhere, and they were old, young, very gendered and sort of gendered, well off, badly off, and mainly sort of OK off. But this is what is special about London, and what this book is about: thirty portraits which pay respect to whoever these people happen to be and which, between them, paint a bigger portrait that starts to emerge as an image of the modern world. They are presented here not in sequence but juxtaposed, in the same manner that they live together on this street. One house gives no clue at all as to what you will find in the next and there is rarely much orientation to the street itself.

I call these chapters portraits because I employ an approach that may have become somewhat passé in mainstream anthropology, a form of holism. A feeling that, in many cases, there is an overall logic to the pattern of these relationships to both persons and things, for which I use the word 'aesthetic'. By choosing this term I don't mean anything technical or artistic, and certainly I hope nothing pretentious. It simply helps convey something of the overall desire for harmony, order and balance that may be discerned in certain cases – and also dissonance, contradiction and irony in others. In learning anthropology, I had been taught to look for such an overarching sense of order in relation to the much wider study of society or culture. On this street it seemed useful to see individuals and individual households as somehow analogous to a

society. So each of these portraits is sketched, and then filled in, according to what seemed to be the style of those sitting for their portrait: some comic, some tragic, some cubist, some impressionist, some bleak and some exuberant. You can read this book as you might move through a gallery. You should pay attention to the details, but then consider each composition as a whole, and finally ponder how each contributes to the pattern represented by the book as a whole. This is not Hogarth or Goya; there is no satire or parody, no horrors I set out to expose. I am an academic, trying to listen to and learn from the same materials that are here on exhibition.

In the conclusion I return to my more familiar academic style and consider the wider picture that emerges when you take the array of portraits as an entry into understanding modern life. I start by acknowledging that these contemporary London households bear little relation to the assumed objects of social science. This is not a society or culture, a neighbourhood or a community. Yet at the same time this is not a picture of the fragmentation, individualism and anomie that were assumed to follow from the absence of societies and neighbourhoods. Instead I focus on what seems to matter most to the people themselves: their ability to form relationships, and the nature of those relationships. Relationships which flow constantly between persons and things. Using illustrations from these portraits, I discuss the way people create this aesthetic; that is an order, or style, which can be discerned across a range of quite different types of relationship. I conclude that there is a hitherto unsuspected way in which an anthropological, rather than psychological, approach can be found appropriate for such an analysis of individual households. This follows from seeing the street as a fieldsite on a par with New Guinea: a diverse collection of societies, each to be respected as a cosmological order in its own right. Just as we have traditionally learnt from the study of the diversity of societies, so also we can learn from the diversity of these microcosms. But, to do this, we need to respect their authenticity and not to dismiss them as superficial.

Anthropology is the discipline which tries to engage with the minutiae of everyday life while retaining a commitment to understanding humanity as a whole. This book tries to remain consistent with that ambition by bringing together these general questions as to the nature

of modern life, with an ethnographic immersion in, and a wonder at, the world of small things and intimate relationships that fill out our lives.

At this point you are invited to turn to the portraits themselves. Each is designed around two aims: an experiment in learning how to read people through their possessions; and to help us appreciate the diversity and creativity of contemporary Londoners. But if you would like to know more about how this study was done, and important issues of selection, ethics and anonymity, then please turn to the Appendix first.

Portrait 1

EMPTY

George's flat was disorienting not because of anything that was in it, but precisely because it contained nothing at all, beyond the most basic carpet and furniture. Absence of a degree doesn't particularly disturb. A place can be minimalist, or there can be a single plant or poster that gathers presence precisely through contrast with the lack of any other resting place for the eye. But there is always something: a little china ornament, a postcard from a trip somewhere, an image of a friend or relative, even an old ticket stub or label. What I can barely ever remember encountering is a habitation entirely devoid of any form of decoration. There is a violence to such emptiness. Faced with nothing, one's gaze is not returned, attention is not circumscribed. There is a loss of shape, discernment and integrity. There is no sense of the person as the other, who defines one's own boundary and extent. I was trying to concentrate on what he was saying, but I was disturbed by the sheer completeness of this void. I began to feel we simply had to visit the other rooms in his house, his bedroom and his bathroom, in the hope that they would not replicate this chilling absence. But when, during a subsequent visit we did take opportunities to glance around these other rooms, they proved just as empty.

This emptiness in someone's surroundings, that leaches away one's own sense of being, was only enhanced by our experience of George himself. Even a space this empty wouldn't have felt quite so disturbing

if it had become filled with the presence of the man. His stories, his attachments and relationships could have re-populated the space, turned this room back into a living-room. But, from the time he started speaking, it was evident that there was no counterbalance between person and place, rather that the flat was the man. It was the way he responded to each thing said to him. Usually when one speaks to another person there is an automatic moment of introspection, a sense that a person has looked inside themselves for the answer, interrogated themselves; so instantly and so obviously that we rarely think of that process. But with George there is the feeling that, at least in the first instance, he seeks to answer each question by interrogating the shape and form of the question itself. He presumes that all questions are formulaic, derived from those bureaucratic situations which have made up the bulk of his encounters with the outside world. Such questions merely seek appropriate answers; they don't want their time wasted with detailed and irrelevant information about an actual person. They demand an answer that instantly confirms one of the three or six categories of answer that can be used as bureaucratic data.

So George ponders what it is that this question is formulated to obtain. If every animal trap has a highly specific shape designed to catch some particular animal, then what kind of trap is this question, what shape or form should George transform into to satisfy it? He never answers quickly, he ponders. With us there is an additional worry because our questions and conversation tend not to fit his previous experiences. They don't sound as straightforward as the usual questions of officialdom, but they don't have that comfortable emptiness of polite English questions designed merely to prevent the impoliteness of silence; questions about the weather or what's on television. But often, after a while, George shifts from looking anxious to a broad deep smile, and it is clear that he has decided what category of question this is and what the appropriate response should be.

There is a mechanical, impersonal quality in his measured replies that makes one aware of the materiality of sound. He speaks always in complete sentences. He will talk about himself, but it is as though he is describing this external person to another. Two examples may help:

'I do not have a motorcar. If I had a motorcar someone would vandalise it. In a way I don't want a car because of this type of thing. I do

not want to go outside, and find something's gone wrong. I don't want anything of that nature.'

The other refers to the only picture we eventually found on display in the entire flat.

'No. I've not been, but that picture's of the Scilly Isles, off the coast of Cornwall. This is an atlas of the world. I've always been interested in world-type geography. This is my best atlas, my book of world geography. If you don't want to look, I understand, but to me geography was one of my favourite subjects when I was at school. This is what I used to look at. If the subject was geography this was one of the books I used to look at.'

Often, when he has finished speaking, he will ask: 'Does this satisfy you?' Or before saying anything else, he will first ask: 'Can I just say something?' Often, instead of elaborating, he will think for a while and then simply say, 'I think the answer to that is no', or 'I think I shall answer yes to that question'. He seems anxious that the answer given is complete, that no one is muddled, that any additional information could complicate things.

This way of speaking is matched by the deliberate precision in his appearance. A seventy-five-year-old for whom dressing has the aura of an obligatory routine. The black creased and ironed trousers, the clean knitted jersey, the striped socks matched to the slippers. One can imagine him dressing incredibly slowly and carefully, moving up his shirt from one button to the next, putting on his tie with great care, perhaps several times over, until it was just right. This is a man for whom putting on the second sock would be an entirely separate activity from putting on the first sock.

The immediate temptation is to classify George as lacking something in himself. As being slow on the uptake, or whatever the appropriate medical term would have been. Actually that phrase, 'slow on the uptake', seems to fit his manner perfectly. But, as we listen to him carefully, I increasingly feel that this would be wrong. As George's story unfolds, something else emerges: that there is nothing innately slow about George, but rather he has become what we encounter as a result of all that has, or more importantly has not, happened to him. There is something else not going on here. Just putting a label on him would be to substitute effect for cause.

Notwithstanding the emptiness of his own surroundings, George remembers places that had their own decoration. His grandmother had 'proper' pictures on the wall, ones that, he reckons, were worth something. His father had pictures of birds – 'English type birds, not foreign birds'. He remembers his grandmother's house as a big house. He had no siblings. What he seems to have had from the beginning was a sense of tyranny, of being completely under the control of an authority. All later authority became a copy of the original and most total exemplification of authority, which was his parents. It appears that every time he might have been allowed to do something or go somewhere, or become somebody, his parents prevented it and he was powerless to do other than their will. When the war broke out he was supposed to be sent away from home, but his mother desperately tried to fight this. When she failed and he had to leave, he became sick immediately, to the extent that the officials relented and he returned to spend the war in London with his mother. Similarly, although he passed his examinations such that he could have stayed on at school, his parents took him out of school and refused to allow him to continue. He worked from 16 to 18 and then passed a test to go into the navy, but this was countermanded by his father, who sent him to the army. These references to his ability to pass examinations and tests don't seem to suggest any intrinsic slowness of thought.

George describes such events without any evident rancour or bitterness, but in his typical slow descriptive monologue. But he seems entirely aware of the constant unfairness and constraints in his life, an example being the impact of his parents. At one time he was in the army. He never saw active service, something he attributed to his parents: 'No I never left the British Isles. That's another thing. My father and mother have always said "You are not to go outside the borders of the British Isles".' In fact when he was twenty-one he did eventually go on a trip organised by his evening class to Sweden, but that was the nearest point he ever seems to have come to an actual revolt against his parents' wishes. He never again went abroad. At one point he noted 'my father was even worse than my mother'.

School clearly made quite an impression on George as a social environment outside his home. He still thinks of much of life in terms of subjects that are taught at school, such as geography. He has clear memories

of his time at school, wearing short trousers, serving in the church. Teachers seem to have captured something of his parents' authoritarian role. In turn, this sense of authority was transferred to his encounters with employers, and now increasingly with bureaucrats. After the war he obtained work as a clerk in a large company. He worked there until he was fifty-five, when he was retired under protest, since he wanted to continue at least to sixty. He continued to look for employment, turning up regularly at the employment exchange, but this was to be his last job. He has been in this enforced retirement for twenty-one years. The decades at work seem to occupy very little space in his life. Yet one could easily imagine him in one of those black and white newsreels which show an Edwardian vista of offices with rows and rows and rows of identical looking men filling in identical looking ledgers. In meeting George, it felt as though one was meeting the last of those clerks.

On our first visit it was probably clear we were searching around for material things to talk about, and so when we returned he had carefully gone through his possessions and finally found in a drawer a postcard from a lady in Spain. There was a story attached. He had been asked:

'Would I be willing to meet her at the airport and take her to the house where she was going to live. I'd never met her before. I said how can I recognise a lady at the airport like that? I was told I was to go to an address in Fulham where the lady was going to live. I'd never been to the road before. So when the day came I was told to go to London airport and sit on the chair outside the entrance to number 4. I had to find number 4 and sit in the chair and wait for the lady to come up and speak to me. I wouldn't recognise her. She was supposed to come up and speak to me. I sat there for hours. I was wondering if the whole thing had been cancelled when suddenly a young lady came up and spoke to me, told me what her name was and said now are you going to take me to the house in Fulham? So I took her.'

It seemed as though any request to take responsibility for an action was quite exceptional. That he had been singled out, taken from a row of desks and asked as an individual to do something. One could still feel his fear of that responsibility. Almost the only memories that stand out from that period are the deaths of his parents, and the responsibilities he had for the funerals. It sounded as though the terrifying prospect of having to deal with the funerals was as memorable as the

deaths themselves. Maybe George had then, or has now, some form of mental retardation. But what I sensed was more a fear of having to act as an agent of his own fate. His account suggested that, for some reason, his parents used him, their only child, to give themselves a singular experience of total authority. An authority that sucked out his core, the basis for any expression of his own will, leaving him ever after dependent upon authority, teachers, employers and always also a dependency upon the officialdom of the state. The flat was empty, completely empty, because its occupant had no independent capacity to place something decorative or ornamental within it.

In order to be in range of his work, George went to live at a YMCA, which provided care for him in the way his own home had. He really couldn't imagine staying anywhere else. But, finally, at the age of thirty-three, it was clear that he no longer counted as 'young', and he was told he would have to move out. The manager helped him find another hostel, which lasted around five years, after which he was moved to the hostel he had stayed in right until the time he was moved to his present flat. Just a year before we met him, this hostel was closed down. He simply assumed he would be moved to yet another hostel. He was told to apply for one. As he put it. 'And I filled in four different forms, transfer forms, and they altered them. They were checked by members of staff. And I ended up nowhere.' As often when George talks, there is that terrible sadness in his particular phrasing that makes it completely clear that George knows that on every such occasion he could only ever have been considered as an afterthought. He watched as each occupant left for a new place. He talks about them being taken away in a motor-car. The last one left in a minicab. No one thought to give him a forwarding address, so there would be no way he could keep in touch with any of them in the future. Finally there was no one left but him. Even then, no one seems to have been concerned with George. It was only the caretaker/support worker who was confronted with the fact that he had to be dealt with when she wanted to take a holiday. At that point she informed him that he would be moved to the flat he now occupies. 'But I did not want to live alone by myself. But these people, all these experts, said this was the only suitable and available place for me. So here I am.'

A van was supposed to pick him up at midday. It broke down. He waited. Eventually at 3.00 p.m. another van came for him. They packed

up his things. Not even the support worker came with him to this new flat – just the two removal men. They brought him and moved his possessions, first to the pavement, then to the flat itself. The sofa couldn't go up the stairs. It had to be brought in by ladder through the window. It was George's first ever sofa. Even if he had no ornaments, he still needed basic carpet and furnishing. But no one had given thought to this. All the good furnishings went somewhere else. Finally there were a few seconds and leftovers remaining, and he was asked to select from these – which is exactly what he has in his flat today. They came from the lounge of his hostel. His sofa matched another one there, and he requested both, but he was turned down.

So, for the first time in his life at the age of seventy-five, George found himself alone in a flat of his own, without any company at all. Even worse for George was that, for the very first time, he was expected to learn to look after himself. That was excessively hard for him, as he puts it:

'I don't like shopping. I had to pull myself together and do it for myself otherwise I'd have no food to start with. So I pulled myself together and do all my own shopping. I do all my shopping myself. Nobody does cooking for me. That's my worst subject. Whether I like it or not I've had to get on with it, I've had to learn how to do it.'

This phrase, that cooking is 'my worst subject', comes up many times in George's conversation.

George was dumped into his new flat ten days before Christmas. The date was significant. There had been nine people in the hostel during the previous year; two of those went away before Christmas and the remainder stayed on for a Christmas dinner together, surrounded by Christmas decorations. That, at least, had been company. This year, at Christmas, George was alone, just as he had been for the rest of the year. So now we can see why George's flat remained empty. Because, even supposing that George had had the will, the sense of his own ability to take objects or images and use them to decorate this flat; supposing that he felt the psychological strength to do such a thing – in fact, even if the whole bloody flat was stuffed to the gills with inconsequential paraphernalia – it would still have been a completely empty flat. An emptiness without that at one with the emptiness within himself. This was the other reason there were no decorations. There was just no point.

George has now settled into some sort of routine. He goes out about three times a month into central London. He refers to this as going there on business, for example to pay a tax. These expeditions have become major reference points in his life. He may also go out for a haircut. His one point of social contact is with a meeting of Old Age Pensioners at a church hall he attends from time to time. He simply observes that they are mainly female, that they are all poor, that they are all old, but above all that they are not at all happy. His only other outing has been to his one distant relative with whom he remains in touch, a market gardener. He has been to visit their farm a few times over his life. His description of his most recent visit is typically frustrating. It was clear that on some previous occasion he had been taken to see the breeding pigs on a nearby farm. This made a huge impression upon him and he was desperate to see them again. Throughout the visit he had been waiting and hoping that this experience would be repeated, but, being George, he had never actually asked his hosts or indicated his desire. As a result, although he had been taken to see the cows, he was not on this occasion given the opportunity to re-visit the pigs. The way he talks, in some awe, about the 'lady pigs' suggests that maybe an earlier visit was one of the very few occasions when he has directly witnessed any kind of sexual activity. This inability to act for himself in the world is especially evident when it comes to discussion of those things he would most wish to do. One of his prime ambitions is to visit Kew Gardens. He has been there three times, but the last visit was some thirty years before. When we ask where he would most like to live, he can only think of the YMCA.

By far the most important of the outings he does manage for himself is to view Royal pageantry, especially the Trooping of the Colour. He has gone to this ceremony annually for the last twenty-five years. He cannot usually go to the key ceremonies, because these days he finds them too crowded and noisy, and if there is a ticket required, he cannot afford it. So the highlight of his life is most likely to be a rehearsal of the Trooping of the Colour. George is more than simply a royalist. One could imagine the appeal for him of a movement such as fascism, itself an experiment in aesthetics. Fascism attempted to attach to itself individual identity through the participation of each person in its aesthetics. From the Nuremberg rallies to the charisma

and oratory of its leaders, fascism spoke directly to every member of that society in a manner that entranced and made them feel like a pixel in a picture – a picture which was beautiful in its completeness and superior to anything that mere individuals could accomplish by themselves.

George had nothing to mediate this direct relationship between himself and the state. The state has become his mother and father, his teacher and his bureaucrat. The constant oppressor who determines his fate and his only resource – the one that feeds him, clothes him, accommodates him and otherwise ignores him in its own sheer unimaginable superiority to him. It would not even condescend to find out about him anything in excess of what it needs to know in order to deal with him. No wonder, then, that, when the state appears in its full majesty, an unbearable but unrefusable beauty, it draws him like a moth to fire. This exquisite, violent, regal glory that constitutes British history before him and will last forever after him, and which justifies the sheer inconsequential lack of his mere being. Why should he matter in front of Her Majesty parading down the Mall? It was his greatest privilege merely to bear witness and be in thrall to this power, this majestic procession of red and gold and bayonets. He needed to be there to justify all that he was and all that he wasn't.

Not surprisingly, over the years this pure form of authority has started to become an interiorised vision, often reducible to the expression 'them'. One of the most common ways for George to finish his replies is with the expression 'we will leave it at that' with a wry smile. It seems as though on these occasions he knows there is more, he has located something about himself that could have formed part of the response, but sagely he has opted for discretion. Because, on occasion, when something does slip through and he starts to talk beyond the answer, it turns out that this was not the result of introspection but of paranoia. On those occasions he has decided to share with us something of what he knows about 'them': the force outside, that which would be displeased to know that we have come to visit him, that which is watching us and him, that which we should be alerted to and careful of. The particular things they don't like, such as him going to visit some place or the presence of loud music, suggest that 'they' began in his head as admonishing statements by hostel staff. Being unanswerable and

repressed, they hardened like gallstones into permanent and painful interior voices that can no longer be dislodged. Often his statements are not couched as opinions but as something that 'everyone' would say: a generic disapproval of loud noises, or of gossiping with neighbours, where his own voice has become merely an expression of 'the voices'. Perhaps this is why he will watch television but doesn't have a radio. Its disembodied voice is perhaps too close to his unrelenting experience of the voices within.

No doubt George will continue his encounter with the state, from its most lowly officials to its most refined and pure aesthetic. But from now on there is really only one more event that has yet to take place for George, and even that is simply a repetition of the same event that had occurred to his parents. He speaks of his one remaining distant cousin, the one with the farm:

'She knows exactly where I'm to be buried. That's where my mother and father are. When I die she'll come to London, pick up the body and take it to F . . . Then they can decide what to do with it. There's a church in F . . . It will most likely go straight to S . . . crematorium and everybody will go back to F . . . and that'll be the end of it. I'll be cremated.' George has had a will made up. He was once told that people get very excited if they are mentioned in a will. His cousin is the only person George knows, so this is the person to whom George will leave . . . absolutely nothing.

During our time on this street we heard and encountered many tragedies, people who faced all manners of diseases and degradations, who nearly died, who actually died, whose children had been killed. There is no escaping the horror and tragedy in the interior of people's lives. But it was particularly after meeting George that we found ourselves in tears after leaving his flat. Because in every other instance there was a sense that, at least, that person had once lived. With George, by contrast, one simply couldn't escape the conclusion that this was a man, more or less waiting for his time on earth to be over, but who at age of seventy-six had never yet seen his life actually begin. And, worse still, he knew it.

Portrait 2

FULL

The curtain opens on a scene from the *The Nutcracker*; a lounge and drawing-room resplendent with Christmas decorations. In the bay window is the most perfect Christmas tree, topped by a fairy whose clear features and hand-made white net costume provides the apex to the array of silver and gold baubles and delicately crafted ornaments that adorn every branch and indent the tree offers for decoration. None is too large or gaudy, there is nothing plastic or vulgar. At the foot of the tree larger presents lie scattered. On a table in front of the tree is a nativity scene, unusual in that both crib and figures are of plain unpainted wood, tall austere kings looming over the cradle. They seem unimpressed by the glitter and sparkle of the myriad lights reflected in the silver tinsel which occupies any spare niche of wall and ceiling that lends itself to additional adornment.

From the centre of each ceiling there hangs an elaborate contrivance of circles and spokes from which are suspended a hundred tiny little parcels, wrapped up in green and red crepe. The diversity of shapes discernible through the wrapping promises an array of presents, each individually selected. Collected over the year, they might be a wooden ornament, a cigarette lighter, or, sometimes, just a lump of coal. The shapes have become only partly discernible in their careful wrapping, enhancing the sense of mystery and promise. Each one is designated by

a small number stuck onto the surface. Green tinsel weaves its way along these lines and circles of parcels, punctuated by small lights. Tinsel and lights extend from the centre of each room to the corners and in additional arcs along the walls, from corner to corner. On closer inspection, the lights are found to be small antique glass in the shape of miniature Chinese lanterns, with hand-painted designs. Between the two rooms there must be close on a hundred of them. They are neither dull nor bright, but simply sufficient to diffuse a generous sprinkling of light that seems to come from everywhere.

In one corner sits a portly and elderly gentleman, stooped over a desk. In one hand he holds pliers with which he deftly works many lines of gold cord, together with ornaments and lights; repairing, setting, arranging and lovingly creating additional pieces still to be set, though at first there seems to be no place left that could yet bear them. The combination of patience and precision suggests a craftsman, who brings to this task years of experience garnered from professional work. One senses that this task is one he has given himself year after year, decade after decade. This tradition, so far from making the task seem dull or repetitive, has rather enshrined this particular time of the year as the climax, as a period of feverish excitement against which the rest of the year pales, creating a grey background to highlight the colour and splendour of the season. This seems to be his moment. Just as years of repetition and experimentation lie behind the integrity of the room decorations, which now appear as a natural and ideal fit to the interior space; so his skills of concentration and fingerwork have developed to fit perfectly to this task – which more than any paid labour, so fully expresses the person.

For, in truth, this is not a scene from a *Nutcracker*; no dancers are waiting in the wings, no curtain has opened. It is just another ordinary terraced house in an ordinary terraced street. And yet no childhood memory of the *Nutcracker*, no lithograph of Cratchit and his family, no West End store window or specialist Christmas shop in Alsace or National Trust recreation has ever appealed as this lounge and dining-room setting of Christmas. Only Bergman's film *Fanny and Alexander* seems to capture its significance. It is the product of a century of devotion to the cultivation of Christmas itself. There are no plastic baubles. The Chinese lights were first collected by the father of the man now working the gold threads. The

original collection grew until these Chinese lanterns were no longer for sale as a result of the Second World War. Each year since has added its own contributions of other ornaments. The hand-crafted wooden nativity scene is from the Philippines, bought on a visit fifteen years ago. This year's contributions include some blue glass discs with painted Christmas scenes, suspended as part of the ceiling decoration. They were purchased a few months earlier from a shop specialising in Christmas decorations in Prague. The only other innovation of the current year is a rearrangement of some of the lighting in the hall. That is sufficient. Changes are slight and careful, tested for a year or two and then incorporated or rejected. The house has been adapted through this same gradual evolution, so that now the chandelier slides across to make way for the hanging of the numbered gifts, and there has been extensive re-wiring with many additional fitments, such that no part of the room is excluded from its contribution to the season.

Behind this labour of love lies the labour which is love, something that becomes evident as soon as one is able to observe how this Christmas scene fulfils its ultimate purpose: when it shifts from foreground to background; and becomes merely the setting to celebration, to conviviality, chatter, drinking, feasting, gossiping and re-acquainting. During this season of family visiting there will be careful acknowledgement of all that has happened in the year past, celebrating what each individual who passes through this scene has in turn contributed. If young enough, they will take their presents from beneath the tree. But at the same time their own experiences and achievements of that year are brought and laid at the foot of the tree in the form of conversation, listening and appreciation.

While the elderly man has been bent over his work, his wife has been busy in the kitchen. This year there are eighty-one home-made mince pies as well as bowls of fruit salad, and many supermarket goodies, from puddings to stilton. These have to be unrefusably good, since she knows that they will be encountered by family and friends already stuffed with the turkey, ham and other savouries that she has also prepared. The single most important marking of the season for this couple is that every one of their-five children and ten grandchildren, the latter ranging from five to twenty five, will at some stage come and partake of their Christmas festivities. And this year they will achieve this goal.

Most, but not all, will appear on Christmas Day itself. For, in truth, no in-laws have ever managed to put up serious competition to this year-long devotion to the one season. Usually those who cannot make it on the day itself arrive during the subsequent days, until, four days after Christmas, all are accounted for, bulked up by friends, neighbours and other seasonal visitors – this year even anthropologists. No meal lasts less than three to four hours. A century or more of accumulation has somehow been transmuted into the holism of the scene itself, just as generations of experience and expertise have gone into this cultivation of sociability – that sociability which is the front stage to these celebrations. The connection between this devotion to persons and to things is nothing obvious or intrusive; rather, it flows so naturally that it may take a certain academic, critical distance just to come to an awareness of its being there at all.

It was there at the moment when Mrs Clarke interrupts her conversation with you abruptly because she has caught sight of one of the children who is just about to open a parcel. At first she says nothing to the child; she merely makes sure that the parents do not miss the implications. Do they want the present opened now; will they ensure a record is kept of whom it is from so that its receipt can be properly acknowledged; is there a sense of occasion appropriate to the opening? Otherwise the social meaning will be lost. A child cares little about the whos and the whys and merely latches onto a – now anonymous – toy with the naked greed and hedonism of childhood. But that would be the kind of waste which is most abhorred in this family: the waste of an opportunity for social appreciation.

That sociability is there, again, when Mr Clarke seems to know exactly how to choreograph the provision of drinks without as much as turning around. The low, base notes of ordinary white wine, tea and fizzy drinks need to be punctuated by special high notes. A bottle of champagne should never just be opened; it must occasion squeals of delight and be bubbly in its conviviality as well as in its consumption. An old port should only be opened when those who drink it will appreciate its particular and special nature. This means that it won't emerge at all this Christmas, no one is in that kind of mood; they are too flippant and the banter is too light. But that doesn't matter – it doesn't even matter that port is out of fashion right now. It lies upstairs and will come

down in ten years, if need be, at any rate only when Mr Clarke has a sense that a moment of proper appreciation would follow upon its entrance. So, when the party is on an even keel, it needs simply to be kept supplied; but when it needs some extra sparkle either he or his wife know that there is something special, some little extra firelighter to rekindle any embers already starting to lose their power to keep winter at bay.

But, more than food and drink, what they are alert to is achievement: any conversation that happens to mention what this or that person has managed for themselves or for others during the course of the year. The single most important ingredient to this recipe of love is appreciation. No one is less important than another, no one should have to claim credit for themselves. When any new visitor arrives, they will hear an ever-growing list: of this one, who has gained a place at Nottingham to study physics, and of that one, who did better than expected at their GCSE exams (or would have done, but for the unfortunate coincidence of illness or a poor teacher). Everyone can be excited by the promise of the new job that a nephew is about to start, surely more interesting and less oppressive than the one he is now due – or rather overdue – to leave. Did the visitor miss the story about this grandson's holiday in Morocco, or that this granddaughter is starting to go out with someone more regularly? These too are little lights, hand-crafted, none outshining another, all patiently collected and displayed, all contributing to the collectivity that is family and friendship – the twin spirits of Christmas present.

Christmas is the festival which unites the general and the particular; it is the most universal in the sense that everyone, in a hundred countries – today, even non-Christian countries – is imagined to be celebrating the same thing on the same day. Yet it is simultaneously the most specific of all the festivals, since no one else ever celebrates Christmas in the way 'we' celebrate it. The festival brings the majesty of the greatest to the least. The traditional English Christmas moves, during the day, from the divine family to the royal family to our own family. Each celebrant brings their own unique traditions.

And this family is no exception. Take, for example, those little parcels, wrapped up and suspended by string at the centre of each ceiling. Each visitor picks a number from a hat which corresponds to a number on one

of the parcels, and this is then theirs to harvest. In this manner, the background decorations enter into the foreground of social interaction, to be consumed along with the food and drink, so that everyone ends the day feeling bloated with consideration and company.

This book contains thirty portraits selected from a hundred households, but, if I recall one moment of greatest pleasure, it was in the presence of this family. This happened not in the year when we participated in their Christmas celebration, but in the following year, when we arrived in their house during the decoration of the tree. At that point we were confronted by these same objects in their other aspect, as one of the family collections. There were well over eight hundred ornaments designated just for the tree alone, now laid out on the carpet and tables – from foot-long spikes to delicate traceries of glass angels. Arrays in every hue of metallic colour, reminiscent of the reflections and fragility of bubbles; accompanied by filigrees of wire; with tiny scenes, such as a crèche indented in a cave-like space within a sphere. Hundreds of distorted versions of oneself reflected in silver and gold balls and baubles. Choristers and fairies; sea-horses and miniature ribboned parcels; the commonplace and the rare. That was the occasion when we heard the many stories of how they had been accumulated from shops in the neighbourhood to sites all around the world. The highlight was when we were allowed to hang some of the decorations on the tree ourselves. Although Jewish, I was brought up with a full English Christmas; to be granted back my own eight-year-old self so unexpectedly and effectively, in the middle of fieldwork, was sheer delight.

What was remarkable about the Clarkes was the scope of their sensitivity. It somehow managed to include so many people and so many things and yet always to give full consideration and care to that specific person or thing. It was a gradual refinement in the skills of knowing just what would comfort this person, or supplement that collection, or be precisely the right time to offer a particular thought. The source of this particular form of sensitivity lies in the relationship between Mr and Mrs Clarke, the sense that no two people could possibly know more about each other; and this made them only more interested in, and appreciative of, the smallest possible detail of each other's lives. It's evident in the banter between them. Each is constantly correcting the other, adding details, making sure the date is accurate, often flatly

contradicting the other. In some couples, this would imply getting at each other; in others, it would be merely correcting. But in their case it becomes clear after a while that they are actually perfecting each other. They are gifting each other the mutual integrity of their own sense of truth. Something this close could never have developed without what was, most likely, some manner of division and difficulty between them in the past, perhaps over decades. This is not some seamless blending of two smooth surfaces – such powerfully bonded love never is. It is the much stronger and gradual meshing over decades of what once must have included jagged edges and mismatched bits of personality.

But today, in the tightness of their own relationship, they form a safety net which can then protect an increasing number of relatives, friends and others they feel responsible for. As it has expanded, more and more people have come to rely on it. This is the couple who would volunteer to take school outings to the seaside, to intervene in a problem in the locality, to look after a child whose parents needed to be away, to act as school governors or to organise a celebration. Typically, with their own family they manage to keep things complex rather than simple. Unlike most families, they have not been reduced to individual relationships with each separate descendant. Something happens, say, to a pet, to a grandchild, or in relation to the repair of a windowpane – and, somehow, several different family members will be involved, giving of their time, labour, money or advice, so that bonds develop between their descendants and not just vertically, with the older generation. But it is hard to isolate the mechanism behind all this. There is a generosity of spirit whose virtue lies partly in not drawing attention to itself – in particular, in remaining hidden to its recipient. If you want to observe the precision and delicacy of their care, it is better to start by observing their attention to things.

Take for example Mr Clarke and his stamp collection. This is merely one in a series of collections which include the Christmas ornaments, toys like Meccano sets, clocks and glass. The collection that probably represents his greatest passion is that of old cars that he can renovate, and there are countless summer days when, walking up and down the street – an activity which took up much of our time in this study – we have seen him outside his house, pottering around a vintage car he was bringing back to the land of the almost living. But it may well be the stamp col-

lection that absorbs most of his time. Started when he was eight, it now consists of many albums, mainly based on British and Commonwealth/Empire stamps, plus little satellites such as a collection of Russian stamps. More unusually, he also has a passion for what he calls 'Cinderella' stamps: those never formally used for postage, for instance the stamps representing various taxes paid. He is also fond of his collection of propaganda stamps from both Britain and Germany, which formed part of their respective war efforts.

In most of his collecting and repairing Mr Clarke starts from the skills he developed in his work, from his initial training as a chemist to his subsequent work with cars and, more generally, in engineering. For Mr Clarke all activities, whether caring for a child or caring for a collection, expand from the moral centre of seeing a job well done. The skill of care is always painstaking and technical in its application. So his stamp-collecting is light years away from my memories of just opening up envelopes of assorted colourful and curious items and re-ordering them according to half-remembered geography lessons. Mr Clarke has here a whole tray of solvents, specialist tools, and lights and instruments for detecting rare watermarks or evidence of counterfeiting. As we observe him, he is patiently removing inappropriate hinges from the back of stamps and other, damaging effects of the old methods of storage.

The connection between the way he cares for stamps or Christmas ornaments and the way he has cared for people throughout his life is not just one of analogy. Both activities are properly described as care work in the broadest sense because both are saturated with moral principles – which, if anything, are more explicit in the relation to objects. This is evident in his ambivalence as to the potential financial worth of a stamp collection. He may know that his present action of removing the signs of inappropriate previous treatment would enhance the value of these stamps, but he would be aghast at any suggestion that this is the reason behind his actions. He is scornful of those who collect in the hope of making money, pointing out how their search for commemorative stamps or sheets of stamps tends to undermine value precisely by increasing their popularity: which leaves them worth less than the paper they are printed on. He would never expect a dealer to give you back more than a tenth of what you paid for a stamp. If anything, he has gone

out of his way to make sure his collection is not financially valuable – which, he is aware would have made him protective or insecure about its presence. This was never going to be that kind of investment. By contrast, he creates value through the patient juxtaposition of knowledge. He can talk for hours about the relationship between forms of printing used on the stamps and other media, or about the way a series reflects some transformation in the way nature was being appreciated in a particular country at that time. Yet he is not an academic, since his knowledge is not a part of his career or a form of self-presentation, a testimonial to his being clever or having more knowledge than another. It is, rather, a natural accoutrement of the act of collecting, the high degree of professionalism found in all great amateurs.

His morality determines even what he chooses to collect. He scorns the degree to which stamps become valuable because of a technical mistake, such as when they have been printed backwards or with some rare fault. He has no interest in such stamps. A friend collects stamps which have come from the post office of the House of Commons; he sees this as of limited interest. Because, for him, attention to the craft of collecting – or consuming – these stamps is a direct extension of their history as craft production, which he fully appreciates in its own right, as both a chemist and engineer. Intentionality, not happenstance, is the source of the human value to which he wishes to devote himself. With his magnifying glass, he can show appreciation for the miniature two-tone scenes that form the centrepiece of many Edwardian and Georgian stamps or reveal the poignancy of an event – for instance the St Helena stamps overstamped with the resettlement of Tristan de Cunha, which followed the volcanic eruption.

A casual observer tends to think of stamp-collecting as a kind of obsessive, what academics like to call fetishistic, pursuit. But Mr Clarke is always sensitive to the social relations of the activity itself. He goes to occasional stamp-collection meetings or to the annual exhibition at Olympia, but he could never be seen as the kind of stamp geek who reduces relationships to this one pursuit or, worse still, collects objects in lieu of a devotion to relationships with people. On the contrary, he does his best to make sure that each of his descendants has at least the opportunity to develop a serious interest in the craft, but without ever pressurising them beyond what seemed to be the natural length of their

interest. So, while currently he spends much of the time devoted to his collection with an eleven-year-old grandchild, he is quite aware that, for the child, this may only be a passing phase. The person he most respected and learnt from was an uncle who was chair of the civil service stamp collection, whose interest was largely due to the meaningful relationship he found there to the history of colonial government. He and his wife do not visit countries specifically because they are represented in his stamp collection but he will use holidays as occasions for visiting stamp shops.

Stamps remain an active conduit to wider knowledge of history and geography, as does his love of cars. He has probably now visited most of the world's leading car museums. While he can apply some of his work skills to stamp-collecting, the real backbone to his integration of work and leisure is the restoration of old cars, since for much of his life he has worked with cars. The car at the front of the house is his second, out of only seven that were made at the time. The other is being restored for him in the US by a specialist who is simply better than anyone currently available in the UK. When it is finished, he will make a formal application for the original number plate.

To see the bridge between concern for objects and concern for people in Mr Clarke requires listening carefully and putting together different stories. After watching him with stamps and with cars, one can observe how careful, patient and crafted is his care for people. This is easier to observe in the case of Mrs Clarke, whose conversation rarely strays from her constant concern with a vast number of friends and relatives. Her collection of people is much more overt, and makes use of many genres associated with being a woman. After a very short time, Fiona starts to feel like an adopted daughter of the house. But it soon becomes apparent how much their practice of care is centred on the way they combine their strengths, and that it always was like this. Some of their best stories about cars relate to their early days, when they were camping or running a youth club for twenty-four children who otherwise would not have been able to afford a summer holiday. Two of their own children met their partners at this club, just as they themselves had originally met at a Catholic youth club. Then there was the occasion when a dozen children would have been left stranded on the beach, but for Mr Clarke's connection with a local bookie and, through him, with someone back in

London who had the right spare part – so that they could repair the vehicle and keep the holiday literally on the road.

Mrs Clarke has her own means of using this expressive relationship to objects as an instrument of her care for people, as is evident at Christmas. Other people, even pets, can also become a means of extending the fundamental love they share. For example, when Mr Clarke was going to hospital for an operation, they both managed constantly to steer conversation towards the plight of their cat, who was due to have a lump removed at more or less the same time. With respect to the cat they could show their emotions, endlessly petting and combing her and showing their affection by calling her, with the utmost tenderness, a 'horrible old scruffy cat'. Mr Clarke would join in telling the cat: 'you'd better be out of hospital when I am out'.

This refusal of self-centredness, even with respect to such important and anxious events as a forthcoming operation, could be taken as mere reticence, an English denial of, or an embarrassment towards, sentiment. Indeed there are other families where that is all it is, and it can quickly become debilitating and even ridiculous. But in the case of the Clarkes, as with everything else about them, reticence was never going to become something shallow, or an affectation that detracted from their humanity. Rather, it is part of their integrity and their depth. Because, for them, this self-effacement forms part of a larger truth which they would never let themselves forget, and comes from their deep religious faith. That what they represent in life comes in large measure from previous generations and needs to live beyond them to pass on to the future. It is this faith that represents for them the ultimate source of their values.

Just as the collection of Christmas lights started in the generation that preceded them, so do many of the traditions that they treasure. Mrs Clarke is happy to recall what she inherited, whether in skills of cooking or in skills of sociability. Christmas ideally is, simply, what it always has been and always should be. This becomes very clear subsequently, when we meet and carry out our research with some of their children. They fondly remember their Gran's house mostly as it was at Christmas; the lights, the baby grand piano, the playing games. But, once again, Christmas merely stands out as the epitome of a much wider set of continuities. In turn, the children are starting to create their own

Christmas, though in truth this is one area where their autonomy is somewhat stymied by the centripetal pull of the Clarkes' celebrations. But, in time, they will achieve it. Already in so many other respects, these children stand out in more or less precisely the same way that their parents do. Even though they married, for all the influence of their partners and of their partners' families, there persists an extraordinary power of continuity that comes across as a direct legacy of Mr and Mrs Clarke.

For the street as a whole, what is shocking is how few households have any relationship to a wider community, let alone giving service to one. So continuity, to this degree of altruistic commitment, is very clearly something inter-generational. It is the Clarkes' children who, in turn, become school governors, serve their time on the committees of gym clubs or wine societies, keep an eye on neighbours' pets and children and generally give of their labour and their time, and not just out of their pocket, to the service of the wider community. Yet they are no clones; different children take up particular aspects of these features of the Clarkes. One child inherits a love of collections; another has no such interests but is quite passionate in his love and devotion to pets.

So while there is continuity, it is always through a kind of creative reconfiguration of their inheritance. There is a lovely image of one of the Clarkes' sons who used to get his daughter to sleep with long descriptions of the workings of four-cylinder stroke engines, especially the details of the compression cycle. Yet another successful use of engineering, entirely worthy of Mr Clarke himself. Often these legacies come back together in unexpected ways. One of the children has ended up restoring a car, just like his father. But quite unintentionally. It arrived from an elderly and retired teacher. He had always been the one to fix her car and, at the time when she probably knew that she was dying, she insisted that he keep the car, on the promise of keeping it roadworthy. It was the sort of request that he couldn't refuse and now, after her death, feels is even more unrefusable. So, even though it's a pain to do and in spite of not having much idea of what will become of it, he is in fact restoring it. This is a testimonial to his most important inheritance: the aesthetics of care, which he applies equally and indiscriminately to objects and persons, since one always turns out to be the vehicle for the other. Fortunately, he has also inherited his father's appreciation of the intricacies of machine technologies.

A daughter, by contrast, seems to have inherited her mother's penchant for stuff saturated with the creativity of her own children. A house that seemed almost like one giant dressing up box; full of photographs, bits of material, boxes of cards, school reports and record collections, even a full-size mannequin. But, once again, there is nothing here that could be dismissed as mere mess, in the sense of material left around after its usage is complete. This is stuff left around in ready anticipation of being used, to be imaginatively transformed by some future action. It is a material expression of the breadth and depth of the relationships within that family, and also of the kind of home where you just know that lonely neighbours or less confident schoolfriends of her children will be inexorably drawn in, to try and gain some purchase on this wealth of humanity.

Mostly this continuity is created by example, but, on occasion, even the relationship between the generations can be engineered. Given the sheer accumulation of collections and other materials, it is a job just to conceive of how the Clarkes could manage the inheritance of their possessions to their children. Between them, of course, they developed a whole series of original and imaginative solutions. Even when they were little, the five children had been designated a colour, which helped them to organise themselves at the time and to prevent arguments over flannels and hats and toothbrushes. One of their sons recalled another advantage. When times where hard and the Christmas presents could be little more than a hand-knitted egg-cup warmer, at least they were each given one in their respective colours, which made them seem personal. Recently, each of the children have been invited in turn to put tiny stickers of their respective colour onto any of the furniture and other possessions in the house that one day they would wish to inherit. As with everything in the family, no sense of seriousness is allowed to intrude into what has successfully turned into a game. They can lark around, joke about it, and in the process actually learn to share and retain an overall sense of fairness. They can also express their desire for particular objects such as a canteen of cutlery, in such a manner that it enhances rather than sidelines the care for persons, inseparable from those attachments. This was the Clarkes' way of making a will. Instead of a ponderous sharing out of assets, it was a fun recalling of things which had, over the years, become evocative and therefore valuable to each specific person.

In a similar spirit, the Clarkes often use Christmas for another set of gifts. Although the children may have left home decades before, this is not a family who throws away anything that can be cherished. There are lofts full of childhood toys and other objects, because, however much the children have come and taken their own belongings, there are always more left behind. So now, for one Christmas, the Clarkes may have taken all the old school reports and bundled them up in sacks with ribbons of the respective colours of their children and given them to each, together with the other Christmas presents. Or it may be some of the old toys such as Muffin the Mule or teddy bears. One year it was their medical records; all those little books one tends to be given on visits to the children's clinic. Another year, it was their art works from primary school. Once again, the Clarkes' divestment from things had become almost imperceptibly integrated into the dominant Christmas traditions of gift-giving and playing of games.

The Clarkes are one of the reasons why, as well as writing an academic text in the future, I wanted to paint these portraits. To convey something of the sense of ethnography as enchantment, as a privileged access to such private beauty. As in all these portraits, it has been possible to record and include only a few fragments of what there is to learn from the Clarkes. But I have to hope that there is enough here to convey a sense of their extraordinary craftsmanship and of the central role of their material culture. From this family one learns the artisanal form of love, care and devotion, performed with such subtle grace, creativity and imagination that the ways persons become objects of care and objects become subjects of relationships blend imperceptibly with each other in the overall fullness and artistry of these lives.

Portrait 7

HOME AND HOMELAND

Mrs Stone first came to settle in London from Jamaica in 1956, and to this house in Stuart Street in 1958. The house in Stuart Street has the feel of one long inhabited by a family. It has lost any pretension to an architectural or decorative style, rather, it echoes back the intense network of family relationships of which Mrs Stone is now the apex, having twenty-three grandchildren and, while we were visiting her, her first great grandchild. The house is occupied by two main classes of material. One consists of items such as books, music and pictures which relate to her Christian faith; the other, an abundance of photographs and cards representing her extended family. The significance of these cards will emerge later on. Mostly, while Mrs Stone talks to us at length about weddings, holidays and trips to Jamaica and the doings of her grandchildren, her second husband sits in the corner. Having suffered a stroke, he is severely limited in his ability to communicate. But, although he cannot talk, he can certainly understand, and there is a breadth to his smile, an enthusiasm to his supportive nods that has become an integral part of the warmth of this friendly living-room.

For the birth of her first two children, Mrs Stone returned to Jamaica, where her own mother supervised the arrangements. Then she did not return for over a decade, and her next four children were born in London. After this, she started to visit Jamaica at least once a year, and

she has now made some thirty return trips. In 1987 she decided to return permanently to Jamaica, to a house she had built in Christiana, one of the coolest and highest sites on the island. She was not alone; many of the original migrants from the island, some of whom had settled in Stuart Street, had also returned around that time. Neither was Mrs Stone alone in her experience of the failure of this enterprise. For her, this was primarily a result of the difficult relationships between her first husband and his relatives in Jamaica. Eventually, in 1991, she felt she had had enough and, with a single suitcase and a few clothes, she left her husband and returned to the house in Stuart Street, which fortunately had not been sold in the meantime.

One might think that that would be enough: the project of making a home in Jamaica would have ended with this failure. But Mrs Stone could not abandon her ambition. Since her return in 1991 she had gone to court, in a dispute with her first husband over both houses – in Jamaica and in Stuart Street. In 2005, when the case was finally resolved, the first thing she did with the money she received was to build another house back in Jamaica. Almost everything about this project spelled out the word contradiction. One of the foundations for the relationship Jamaicans feel between home and homeland lies in the tradition of family land, as opposed to personal or private ownership. That is, land was always jointly owned by the extended family, all of whose members retained rights to it so that it therefore could not be sold. Yet the money for building this new property came from what is now a very common practice in Jamaica, namely that of splitting up such family land between individual owners. In Mrs Stone's case she then sold all but the three lots she retained for building her own house and perhaps later on others, for her children. In this manner the long tradition of family land is finally coming to an end.

Recently Mrs Stone went to the Ideal Home exhibition, where she fell in love with some expensive Italian furniture, which she purchased for her new house in Jamaica. By contrast, her house in Stuart Street is furnished entirely with very modest materials, which nowhere match the standard she has set for her Jamaican home. This division between the place she earns her money and the place she spends it on goes back to earlier generations. Her own father worked in the US before the war and, with that money, created a middle-class lifestyle in Jamaica, with a

farm and enough cattle for Mrs Stone to claim one could 'bathe in milk'. She fondly recalls that, even when going around the farm, he would sport a massive diamond tie-pin and his velvet hat. So she, in turn, having made her living in London, can only imagine a fine house as something belonging to Jamaica.

Mrs Stone describes the house she has just been building in Jamaica: 'the two lounges, one is upstairs and one is downstairs and three en-suite. You just go into your bedroom and that's it, everything is in there, your bathroom and stuff. The ground floor has the master bedroom and the en-suite and the powder-room. It's got space. You can put what you want where you want. Then there's a garage, as you can see, there's a door that takes you right in front of the garage into the house there. Then you get a kitchen, a long kitchen there and one upstairs.' This is the house for her new Italian furniture; just as her father had a glass-topped table and a fine roll-top sofa that they would put out under the mango tree for him to relax on. Her main memory as a child is the endless polishing of the fine silverware. By contrast, the ornaments in her house in Stuart Street are generally inexpensive and functional.

Yet there is another contradiction. Mrs Stone cannot match this continuity of commitment to the house itself with any personal commitment to actually live there. For one thing, given her husband's circumstances, she is well aware of the advantages of the National Health Service, as she says 'you can't get it nowhere, you can't get it in America. Here is best.' But there is also her own personal affection for England, notwithstanding the prejudices she suffered during her early years. She knows full well that 'I can't give up England . . . I think it's because I spent all my other years in England so it's not so easy . . . I'll have to come back here. So everything is just going to be running back to Britain, running back to my home, to my mother country, that's what it is you know. Yes, run back to my mother country.'

As a result, she is now quite unclear what to do with the house that she has built. She says: 'When I was up there, because we went up there, the person who was looking after the house told me that the house is sort of nearly finished and everything and what do I want to do with it because it has to be occupied. Because people might just, you know . . . So he said what do I want to do with it. If I wanted to rent it. And I said no, I don't want to rent it, I want to go in my house. So I'll have to take

tificates of all her previous qualifications: school exams, naturalisation papers and secretarial courses. Her husband never returned these to her from that first house in Jamaica. Such certificates tend to be seen as hugely important to people from the Caribbean, wherever they are living. In parallel with the house itself, they form the material evidence for one's life, its achievements and the sense that gradually, over the years, one has become a person of substance.

In listening to Mrs Stone's story I could not help but relate it to a recent PhD thesis I had supervised, by Heather Horst, on the topic of Jamaican migrants returning to their homeland. If her work were to be published with a frontispiece, it would have to depict one of the graves she later showed me in rural central Jamaica. The gravestone in question took the form of a miniature concrete house complete with doors, windows and gables. It looked more like something to put dolls in than something to lay a corpse beneath. Some of these graves are surrounded by ironwork identical in style to that which surrounds actual houses. She interprets these gravestones as marking the end of a long journey. For most Jamaicans, the project of building a house is not a one-off act. Traditionally most people could only afford to build their own house in stages. As money accumulates, one might lay a foundation for a new room, or complete the tiling of another. Building the home of one's aspirations is often a life's work. The house was always the primary mode by which life itself was marked as a progression. Despite all the pressure from the church, it wasn't having children that usually led people to marry. It was only when one could demonstrate one's ability to have some sort of house of one's own that marriage was seen as proper.

This close association between building a life and a home is obviously complicated when a Jamaican migrates to London. The move creates an ambiguous relationship between home and homeland. Most migrants intended to return to Jamaica at least in retirement; an intention often reinforced when they experience a rejection of their initial assumption that they would be fully accepted as British. But if they do return to Jamaica they face a second, even more unexpected, rejection, as Heather has documented in her thesis. Those who never left see these returned migrants principally as 'English' and may worry that, with their greater wealth, they will lay claim to land and authority at their expense.

Furthermore, returned migrants have grown an affection for certain elements of English life such as an English-style garden and forms of behaviour, so that they have a sense of ambivalence about who they are. As such, they may feel they are no more at home in Jamaica than they were in London.

These two paths come together as returned migrants attempt to create their sense of homeland though building their dream retirement home. One of the principal incentives behind the initial migration to London was that it would become a means to afford the kind of home they aspired to but could not expect to construct on local incomes. The primary form of re-location in Jamaica is through building and furnishing. As 'The English', returned Jamaicans tend to migrate to the cooler uplands of central Jamaica and build homes which any Jamaican recognises both from scale and from style, as houses of returnees. So in the first instance the project of returning to Jamaican identity through resettlement is inevitably a failure: they are no longer considered to be Jamaicans. Heather found in her study that many of these returned migrants increasingly spend their time going to, or being involved in, the organisation of what become highly elaborate funerals. Because it is only in death, interred beneath these miniature models of the perfect house, and interred in the Jamaican earth itself, that the final return to Jamaica is successfully completed. A return blessed by deep religious faith in another final resting place.

So Mrs Stone is living in one home, but feels strongly the pull of two other ideal homes: that in Jamaica and that in heaven. She is always aware that beyond the everyday secular life there is another place where one's heart and soul must dwell. Although this living-room has plenty of books and music, not one of them is secular. Similarly, all the decorations on the wall that are not family photographs are religious images. Mrs Stone plays the organ at her local church, and many of her family attend church every Sunday. When the new house was finished in Jamaica, the most important task was to organise its blessing. This was arranged in Jamaica, through the local church and returnee residence association. She played the organ and fed around forty guests for a ceremony which inaugurated the house as a proper – that is, a blessed – house.

It is clear, though, that, when Mrs Stone counts her blessings and

appreciates how far they outweigh her tribulations, she need not differentiate between those that come directly from on high and those she can see around her in her family. Apart from photographs, the most significant material expression of these relationships comes in the form of cards. Cards on mantelpieces, cards on table tops, cards in bundles tied with strings or rubber bands and kept in plastic bags. Her children might have preferred to introduce more modern forms of communication. Her daughter bought her a computer, which sits in the corner of the room, almost completely covered in crocheted lace, topped with a smiley stuffed animal. Her daughter may have subsequently complained, in exasperated tones, 'Mum, this is not for knitting on', but Mrs Stone doesn't even know if it is connected to the internet or not.

By contrast, her relationship with these cards is deep and full. She reads out some of the messages they contain, both those pre-printed on the cards and the hand-written additions. 'For a very special grandma.' 'When I think about the things you have done for me over the years I know that you're not only a wonderful mum but also a unique person.' 'So many things that have brought me happiness and comfort have been gifts from you. Things like encouragement, advice and kindness.' 'Mum, have a wonderful mother's day, love you loads thanks for remembering me in my times of need.' These cards clearly derive from a common stylistic tradition. They are manufactured with paper so heavily drenched in sentiment that they feel as though if you squeezed them tight, they would flood the floor with tears.

One of my (no doubt many) prejudices is that I detest the English attitude to sentimentality. If I happen to listen to a programme such as 'Critic's forum' on Radio Four, I can more or less predict that at some point a critic will comment on how excellent a film or book is because it doesn't contain a shred of sentimentality. Sado-masochistic violence of practically any form is entirely appropriate for aesthetic creation, but God forbid that something might contain a trace of sentimentality; this would forfeit any claim to artistic merit. By contrast, I will sometimes seek out a Bollywood family musical or a Hollywood version of *Little Women*, knowing full well that I will start crying as soon as the scene is set and continue through to the credits at the end. Given the national stereotypes about the English inability to express

emotion and the way this constrains relationships, one can't help thinking that the abhorrence of sentiment is in some respects a systematic denial of something that the English are in need of rather more than most.

I admit I find it hard to relate immediately to messages such as:

> Your kind and caring ways I hope you always share,
> your patience and understanding are far beyond compare

or:

> To thank you for the memories and all the lovely ways,
> you have of bringing special joy to ordinary days.
> To thank you for your thoughtfulness and for your special love,
> and to wish you all the happiness you're so deserving of.

Yet overcoming this distance and condescension is essential. The primary grounds for the practice of anthropology is empathy, the ability to see the world from perspectives other than one's own, and empathy is not a million miles from sentimentality – it is the generic as opposed to the personal expression of feeling. One has to start therefore from the undeniable observation that, like many others, Mrs Stone clearly finds the precise phrases used in these cards to be highly significant and meaningful. Certainly they are manufactured commodities, but then so are chocolates, or films, or flowers.

When Mrs Stone buys cards for her relatives, she doesn't simply select the first she comes to; she will read a dozen different such cards until she finds one that expresses what she feels. With so many relatives, a good deal of her own time is spent finding the right message. She has become a connoisseur of what some may regard as doggerel but which, through the labour of her selection, becomes profound. 'I like to read the cards, and sometimes they ask me – where did I get these cards from. Someone told me recently: "Grandma, I think you might have your own printer." Because they don't see those things anywhere. They are so special – so, you know, I try to get special cards for them and I know they do the same thing for me.' Her aim is to make someone feel that they are cherished, and in turn she assumes that, when she receives a card, it

signifies the careful selection of a rhyming message that conveys the degree to which she is cherished.

Mrs Stone's problem is that she simply cannot bring herself to throw these cards away, however many there are and however much they accumulate. 'Some of my cards are up for months. Sometimes it's a thank you and I like to look at some of the thank yous. I see there is a pretty thank you and I think, let me see who's sent it to me. "I've got to hand it to you, I've always known you were thoughtful, but this time you have outdone yourself." So when you read thank you cards like this, I don't want to get rid of them straight away, you don't really want to. "It's nice to know that there are still people who take so much pleasure in doing special things and making others feel good and I just had to thank you and let you know that I think you're someone very special." You can't throw away things like this. It's these two little ones, they can barely write: "Dear grandma, really sorry we are so late getting back to you, we have been waiting for some photos to come back so we could send you a card with them."'

She does want to clear some of the cards out, but, when she starts on one of the bundles and reads the content, she just hasn't the heart to part with them. 'Some people give you a card and you know it is coming from the heart. So I definitely keep those cards. So many happy things mean I can't throw them away.' I have got lots of them over the years, I try to throw them away sometimes but can't!' Between birthdays, and Christmas and perhaps above all Mother's Day, it is hardly surprising that the house seems to be drowning in cards. But nothing else speaks so directly to what makes Mrs Stone's life worthwhile.

A middle-class person may spend just as much time going through cards published by the Victoria and Albert Museum or Oxfam to find a visual image that is appropriate because it isn't sentimental, but so perfectly tasteful that in its own way it, too, demonstrates the labour of concern that has gone into its selection. The difference is merely one of class. While the middle class avoid direct reference to what they wish to convey because they consider it vulgar; others, who have not been socialised into a system of aesthetic distancing from the immediacy of emotions, go directly to the message itself. Mrs Stone is quite sure and surely right, that her feelings of cherishing and love will be shared by many other people and that her individual feelings can therefore be

properly conveyed by this generic form. This speaks to a common humanity and she is entirely comfortable with the explicit open sharing of that humanity.

So Mrs Stone I want to say, I appreciate all you are.
I think your home is beautiful and to your family you're a star.
I hope the house in Jamaica is really a dream come true.
And for all your help with our research here is a big thank you.