

I.

A Silly Business

‘One cannot see the future of something learned.’

A Girl's Story, Annie Ernaux

Later on we often had a book with us. Later on. When we were a bit bigger at last though still nowhere near as big as the rest of them we brought over books with us. Oh loads of books. And sat with them there in the grass by the tree. Just one book in fact. Just one, that's right. Lots of books, one at a time. That's it, one at a time. We didn't very much like tons of books did we. No, not really, and neither do we now. We like one book. Yes, we like one book now and we liked one book then. We went to the library for instance and we soon lost the habit didn't we of taking out lots and lots of books. Yes. Yes. Yes we did. First of all of course we took out all the

books we possibly could. Which was probably eight books. It's always either six books or eight books or twelve books. Unless it's a special collection of books of course in which case it might only be four. And to begin with we took out as many of them as we could. That's right. We'll take this one and this one and this one, this one, and that one too. And so on. Yes. In a pile up on the high counter for Noddy Head to stamp. And we read not one of them all the way through. It was simply impossible. We couldn't get engrossed. No matter what book we had in our hands we found it simply impossible to refrain from wondering incessantly about what kinds of words exactly were inside the other books. We couldn't help it could we. We just couldn't stop ourself from thinking about the other books and the different kinds of words they each contained and when we picked up one of the other books in order to find out it was just the same. It really was just the same no matter which book we picked up. As long as there were other books we thought about the sorts of words they might contain non-stop and were thus precluded from becoming engrossed with the very book we had in our hands. The very book. A silly business. Yes, it was a silly business. Tossing one book down and picking one book up and tossing that to one side and picking up yet another and so on and getting nowhere. Nowhere at all. Over and over again. And we went on like that for quite some time didn't we until we realised that just because we were allowed to take out six books eight books twelve books four books didn't mean did it that we had to.

No, of course it didn't. So then we took out one book. And of course this aggravated people. Yes. Yes. Yes it did. No end. Is that all you're taking out, they'd exclaim.

Go and get some more. Just one – you’ll have that finished by tomorrow, they’d say. And we’re not coming back again this week. So what. As if the only thing you could do with a book was read it. That’s right. We could sit for a long time couldn’t we with a book beside us and not even open it. We certainly could. And it was very edifying. It certainly was. It was entirely possible we realised to get a great deal from a book without even opening it. Just having it there beside us for ages was really quite special. It was actually because we could wonder couldn’t we about the sorts of words it contained without getting ourself worked up into a ridiculous state. With just one book in the grass beside us we sat there wondering about the sorts of words it contained in a really tranquil and expansive kind of way that in fact enabled distinct images to emerge all of their own accord from who knows where. That was nice. It was actually. The images rarely resembled anything we had seen for ourself directly yet they were not in the least bit vague or far-fetched. Not remotely. From time to time, perhaps to make sure that the images that came about of their own accord didn’t deviate too much from the themes and tone and point in time propounded by the text beside us, we’d pick up the book and open it wherever our thumb happened to stop, and we’d read one or two words from whatever line upon the page our eyes happened to coincide with, and those one or two words would be quite enough, wouldn’t they, to provoke yet more enthralling images.

When we open a book our eyes nearly always go over to the left page. That’s right – the left page, for reasons we have never previously reflected upon, has a much stronger

pull on us than the right page. We always look down first of all at the right page. The right page first, that's right. But the words on the right page always seem much too close. Too close to each other and too close to our face. The words on the right page do indeed make us peculiarly aware of our face. Is it our face? Is it? Well? The words on the right seem far too eager, overbearing, and yes somewhat ingratiating in fact, and very soon our rattled eyes leave the right page in order to seek refuge in the left. We look down at the right page and up at the left page. We do actually. And we nearly always read the left page much more slowly than the right. There seems to be more time on the left page. Yes. Yes. Yes there does. On the left page there is more space it seems, on either side of the words, and above and below every sentence. And the left page nearly always has better words on it it seems. That's right – words like 'shone' and 'creature' and 'champagne' and 'ragged' and 'clump', for example. Words that really don't require any explanation. Words that happen one by one rather than words that bandy together to try to convince you of something that is not happening. It really can't be the case though can it that these distinct operations that words bring into effect are divvied out between the left and the right pages quite so unerringly. No, probably not. Probably it is more likely that we are much more receptive in fact to whatever we read on the left pages than we are to what we read on the right pages because we look down at the right page and up at the left. We do. We do. Which must mean that the book we are reading does not remain still in our hands. It must mean, yes, that after turning the right page over so that it becomes the left page we shift the book slightly upwards. Upwards, yes.

We have a tendency don't we of reading the last few sentences on the right page hurriedly. We do actually. We enjoy turning the pages of a book and our anticipation of doing so is obviously fairly fervid and undermines our attention to such an extent that we can't help but skim over the last couple of sentences on the right page probably without really taking in a single word. Quite often when we make a start on the left page it doesn't make a great deal of sense to us. No. No. No it doesn't. And it is only then, isn't it, that we realise, somewhat reluctantly, that we didn't read the last few lines of the previous page properly. Quite often, we are so reluctant to acknowledge that this makes any difference, we carry on reading. We carry on that's right even though we can't make head nor tail of what we are reading. We carry on regardless because we are vaguely convinced that, surely, if we keep going, the way these current sentences relate to all the sentences we've already read will, actually, sooner or later, make itself perfectly apparent. We don't get very far. No, we don't. We nearly always flick back. We do. And we are nearly always surprised by how much salient detail was in fact contained in the last few lines on the previous right page and we are surprised even further by a very unreasonable thought that comes to us from who knows where which proposes that the typesetter of the book is really quite irresponsible, that they should allow such important sentences to appear at the very end of the right page. Surely the typesetter must be aware that many people derive a great deal of pleasure from turning pages turning pages and as such cannot be expected to read the last couple of lines on all the right pages with consummate diligence. You would have thought so. Turning the page. Turning the page.

Turning the page and holding the book up a little higher. And the reason we do that, now that we are reflecting on it, is because once we have turned the page we feel inclined to lift our chin and gaze upwards. And the reason we feel like gazing upwards is because we have turned over a new leaf. A new leaf! – that’s right. We have turned over a new leaf and as such we feel instantly youthful and supremely open-minded and that is why we quite naturally adopt the uplifted mien of an urbane albeit slightly indulged protégé every time we turn the page. A new leaf. Yes. By the time we get to the bottom of the right page we have aged approximately twenty years. We are no longer holding the book up. No. No. The book has dropped. Our face has dropped. We have jowls. We do. We have a double chin. That’s right. We wallow. We wallow. We are wallowing in our chins. We really have aged at least twenty years. It’s no wonder then is it that we don’t read to the very end of the right page properly. No. No. No wonder at all that we are itching to turn it over. No wonder whatsoever that we anticipate turning the page so very fervidly. As if it were a matter of life or death in fact. Life or death. Life or death. It is a matter of life or death in fact. Yes. Yes. Yes, it is. Turning the pages. Turning the pages. When we turn the page we are born again. Living and dying and living and dying and living and dying. Again, and again. And really that’s the way it ought to be. The way that reading ought to be done. Yes. Yes. Turning the pages. Turning the pages. With one’s entire life.

It could be said couldn’t it that strictly speaking there are no left pages, just the other side of right pages. That could very well be said if one is assuming that the book is face up. Face up. Yes. Face up in the grass. Yes. There in the grass a book right beside us. Face up. Face up in the field in the grass beside the great big tree. Just one book. Yes. And in

fact as far as we were concerned nobody else had this book apart from us. Nobody. Nobody. Not a single soul. No one else had it and furthermore no one else had ever even seen it. It was just ours. Ours entirely. We knew very well of course that that wasn't the case at all, but that's how it felt nonetheless and in fact even now from time to time with certain books the very same feeling returns. It does actually. Erroneous yet compelling. This book is ours and ours alone. Perhaps this atmosphere of exclusivity occurred in the first place because there weren't very many books at home and the few books there were were out of sight inside a corner cabinet in the dining room along with candles and napkin rings and a gravy boat our mother had taken an abrupt and supreme disliking to. Out of sight yet at the same time curiously present. Disturbingly present. Omnipresent in fact. More present yes than rows and rows of books arrayed quite openly on bookshelves one walks past umpteen times a day. And of course 'Little Claus and Big Claus' was very present because mother used to follow us up the stairs and into the bathroom reading out the grubby tale of Little Claus and Big Claus's absurd scheming and callous buffoonery. Gee up my horses! Gee up my horses! That's right. Mother loved that. Laughed her head off. She did actually. And even when we were older she came after us up the stairs laughing her head off with 'Little Claus and Big Claus' wide open in her hands. Gee up my horses! That was kept upstairs on a shelf with all our other books side by side in the spare room. The playroom. Yes. Whereas mother's books glowered like intricate secrets inside the corner cabinet. That's right. Very occasionally we'd slowly twist the small brass handle to silently release the door of the corner cabinet and we'd peer in at the wakened spines of the books lodged in among the candles and the napkin rings and the spurned gravy boat and we

could hardly breathe. It made us feel nervous. It did actually. We were looking at things that were no business of ours. Illicit things. Yes. Yes. Illicit things that looked back at us and saw something. That's right, something inside of us that we in fact knew nothing about. The books looked back at us and something inside of us stirred. Yes. One of those books was *Switch Bitch* by Roald Dahl and we had books upstairs by Roald Dahl such as *Danny the Champion of the World* which was our favourite Roald Dahl book and we had read them all hadn't we, but we hadn't read this book. No, we knew nothing about this book. Not a thing. Yet it was quite obvious wasn't it that this book wasn't like any of our books by Roald Dahl on the shelf upstairs and wasn't meant for us. No it wasn't. It was a book meant for adults. That's right. We could see that straight away. There was a photograph of Roald Dahl inside the jacket cover just like there was a photograph of Roald Dahl inside the jacket cover of each of our books by Roald Dahl. And the photograph was more or less in the exact same place. That's right. But he looked completely different inside the jacket cover of the book our mother kept tucked away in the corner cabinet beside the candles and the napkin rings and the decommissioned gravy boat. He did actually. He wasn't looking at the camera for one thing. No, he wasn't. And he wasn't sitting down either. No, he was standing up. And he was outside. Outside in the wind. In the wind, that's right. It was quite obvious he was standing in the wind because of the way his hair which was thinning lifted away from his head. It occurred to us didn't it that there was probably a small propeller plane nearby. Yes. Yes. And he wasn't looking at the camera. No, he wasn't. And that more than anything made it quite obvious that this book had been written with adults in mind. Adults in mind, that's right. That and the

title. The title, of course. *Switch Bitch*. Switch Bitch. Whenever we overheard our mother reading *The BFG* to our younger brother we would see a woman with a black netted veil over her eyes and a small neat nose and large dark red glossy lips mouthing the word 'bitch' back at her slightly out-of-focus reflection which was tremendously exciting though we didn't fully understand why it was and in fact the excitement this image brought on soon troubled us because it was of an unprecedented nature and all too quickly made us feel guilty and alone and afraid of who knows what. We didn't know. No, we didn't. But were afraid nonetheless.

A Start in Life was in there too. *A Start in Life*, that's right, by Alan Sillitoe and not Anita Brookner. We read that in no time one summer in the back garden. There were two sun loungers on the patio in the back garden and one summer when we ought to have been reading books from the reading list we laid down upon one of the sun loungers in a halter-neck black bikini with a packet of Dunhill cigarettes and read *A Start in Life* by Alan Sillitoe instead. Later on in the afternoon when she got back from her ten till two in the department store our mother would come out onto the patio with sun cream and lie down on the sun lounge beside us in her fluorescent yellow strapless bikini and we'd read bits out to her that we'd already read and reckoned to be highly amusing. She liked that. She did like that she'd laugh. She'd laugh in nearly all the same places where we'd laughed earlier on. It was a very entertaining book. She would lie there smoking Benson and Hedges cigarettes on the sun lounge beside us. Laughing. Laughing and flicking ash down onto the patio. It was a long time ago. It was actually. It was one of the last summers. We can't remember what *A Start in Life* was about. We haven't

a clue. Though we can recollect the gist of the bit that amused us. Yes, the bit we found amusing and so did mother was when the narrator suggests that not everyone is cut out for loafing around day in day out and that really instead of regarding people who do diddly-squat all day with irritation and disdain they ought to be thought of in the highest of terms because actually doing nothing at all day in day out is not nearly so easy as it looks.

There's a fine art to being idle in fact. That's right, there is an art to it, and very few people are naturally in possession of the gumption and fortitude necessary to pull it off. Reading outside on a summer's afternoon. When there have been weeks and weeks of hot sunny days one after the next. There really is nothing else quite like it. We liked nothing better. A tiny dotted beetle might hoist itself up onto the cover of the book face-up beside us. The book that had never before been handled or seen by anyone else. Out of the dishevelled grass, up onto the venerable tableau that was the cover of what – Plato's *Phaedrus*, for example. The columns the platters the pewter the vine leaves the drinking vessels the swarthy shins the lemony lemons the chiaroscuro. We could easily have squished it with our thumb gently applied if we were so inclined. Yes. Yes. Yes, we could. There it was. Little dotted beetle. Stopping and starting. This way and that. Around and around the venerable tableau dottily for ages. Around and around. Quite unable to find a way to properly immerse itself in the moody scene's alluring sagacious gloom. We weren't inclined to flatten beetles dotted or otherwise were we. No, generally not. Or ants. No. Nor spiders even. Vessels. Vessels. And in a way we couldn't tell could we whether the little beetle was from now or from then. No, not really. Not even when it tipped off the cover and beetled back into the grass.

II.

Bright Spark

‘One day we’ll domesticate him into a human, and we can sketch him. Since that’s what we did with ourselves and with God.’

‘Boy in Pen and Ink’, Clarice Lispector

At the end of term the English department sought to recoup all the books that had been gamely issued to each pupil at the start of term. Books hardly any of the pupils had bothered to look at in the meantime, yet now, at the end of term, they felt no compulsion whatsoever to bring them back. This must have been infuriating for the department. The pupils simply had no interest. Not in reading books, nor returning them. Their principal interest, right up until the very last bell, was to disrupt the flow of information and ideas, which the teachers attempted each lesson to set