

Doing Life

BRIAN DIBBLE

A Biography of
Elizabeth Jolley



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To Barbara
The Sufficient Cause when the Necessary Cause is not enough,
in art and life—and in biography . . .



Introduction—That little art which is family life . . .

Should a book, that is a novel, have a message, I am not clear about this, but if my experiences and feelings are of any help to any one then let a message be found for then I shall feel that I am at least doing something in a wider sphere than the domestic routine within the walls of the little house. I shall start in the early years of my life and try and make things take some sort of order but order is not a strong point with me and I shall write with all my heart so that there will be the noise of my children in these pages and the sounds from my own childhood, the people I hope will come alive and the warmth of them be felt. Then there is my school, and afterwards the hospitals where I trained, it is even easier to remember the antiseptic fragrance from the later years as people and feelings were becoming more distinct and more urgent.
A Feast of Life

*If we love what does not yet love us
Can we not give it love . . .*
'Great Branches Fall', *Diary of a Weekend Farmer* (87)

““What Sins to Me Unknown Dipped Me in Ink?”” is the opening essay of *Central Mischief*, Caroline Lurie’s first collection of Elizabeth Jolley’s essays. The title alludes to a couplet from Alexander Pope’s ‘An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot’:

Introduction

Why did I write? What sin to me unknown
Dipt me in ink, my parents, or my own? (lines 125-6)

Elizabeth Jolley's use of those lines signals the fact that her experiences in her family of origin inform her essays and shape her fiction. Her books are full of details from her own life, occasionally even the names and addresses of people she has known. As her prose passage quoted above suggests, she is constantly preoccupied with the family and various analogues of it, like schools, hospitals, and nursing homes, all of them institutions she lived and worked in. This is not to say that her novels are romans à clef or novels with a 'key' to them because, except for her last one, they are not.

Her essays, stories, and novels are meditations on the family and, by extension, the community, communion, and other terms derived from the Latin word *communis* which refers to what people have in common. She is especially preoccupied with love, its possibility, and its potential, including the potential failure of it and what happens then. Thus, sometimes provocatively, she addresses relationships between a couple or among a threesome, like a love triangle, or parents and their child. In Jolley's fictional geometry, if the relationship between a couple is the simplest one that can be imagined, the relationship among three people is the most complex. And so I address myself to the family unit in Jolley's life and work, using as touchstones the originary relationships that existed in her youth between and among her parents, Wilfrid Knight and Margarete Fehr Knight and Kenneth Berrington, whom Jolley called, in italics, *'The Friend of the Family'* ('Mr Berrington' 33).

Jolley often recurred to Leo Tolstoy's dictum that serves as the opening line of *Anna Karenina*—'All happy families resemble one another but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'. This is a study of Elizabeth Jolley and her various families. The first half of the book focuses relatively more on her personal life in England and the second half more on her professional life in Australia.

Hazel Rowley has said that a biographer is part historian, part detective and part novelist.² For me, the most interesting historical discoveries in researching and writing this book were also the most productive ones for interpretive purposes, especially those explaining the factual bases of the

stories that Jolley's mother told about herself and her Austrian Fehr family. A most sombre historical discovery, not described in this book, occurred while reading the black scrawls in a large, more-than-hundred-year-old folio of births, deaths, and marriages in the archives of the Votivkirche in Vienna, close to Jolley's mother's family home. Having determined the date of the death of Margarete Fehr's great-grandfather, as I fanned the remaining pages of the book in closing it, I noticed minute, quarter-inch-wide, blue marks in the right-hand margins. Returning to the entries for 26 July 1874, where Joseph Deri Fehr's death at noon was recorded, I saw the tiny notation 'Z11733 26/8/38' and the word *arisch*, Hitler's neologism for his Aryan *Übermensch*. Thus, within five months of the Anschluss whereby Germany annexed Austria in March of 1938, some agent of the state, like the Gauleiter in Jolley's story 'Paper Children', was checking to see if one of Margarete Fehr's relatives was fit to fight and die for the Third Reich. Perhaps the suspect person was her cousin Günther Fehr who was killed while serving as a doctor in the Battle of Stalingrad four or five years later.

Richard Ellmann's virtually minute-by-minute, womb-to-tomb approach to Joyce, Yeats, and Wilde, once a gold standard for biography, no longer dominates for a variety of practical and theoretical reasons. If I have not employed Ellmann's approach, I have tried to emulate his commitment to detailed biographical and bibliographical research. One reason for doing so is that my position was a privileged one in that I had special access to materials and people and ample time to conduct my research. Another is that, for me, it is necessary to learn as much as possible in order finally to determine what information is to be excluded or included, foregrounded or not. When someone's name came up, I would note it and, if it came up again, would investigate and evaluate any recurrence. Marie Stapf Kemmeter is a good example of a person who became more important with each mention of her name, even though references to her were far apart: as Marie Stapf, she figured in Jolley's childhood, affiliating Jolley to Stapf's Austrian Uncle Otto; as Marie Kemmeter, she influenced Jolley again when they met in Germany in 1939; in World War II, she was the go-between for a German prisoner of war who contacted Jolley's family in Birmingham; and she appears in one of Jolley's juvenile stories as well. If that research commitment makes the biography data-dense, I am hopeful that my defining and contextualising such information will make it meaningful for current and future readers and scholars of Jolley's work.

Introduction

At the same time, mindful of Rowley's reference to the novelist, I wanted to create a 'good read', and thus chose not to foreground theory or critical jargon. Put positively, I chose three strategies for telling my story of Elizabeth Jolley's life and work. The first is to begin with a Knight family history with three embedded 'pen-and-ink' portraits, one of each of Jolley's parents from the time before they met, and one of the older friend of the family who figured directly in their lives for twenty years and in Jolley's until he died when she was thirty. They are people who have invited an unusual amount of speculation from Jolley's general and academic audiences, and so beginning with their stories obviated the need to try to insert them into subsequent chapters. Although the rationale for the portraits and the history is that the family unit is the ground that Jolley continually reworks in her poetry, fiction, plays, and essays—often recycling her own family events and always addressing topics integral to her Knight-Jolley family—readers not interested in details of Jolley's remote and proximate, real and virtual family (including the pivotal 'Mr B', the ubiquitous Anti Mote, the nudist Uncle Acheson) should not be seriously disadvantaged by just skimming the 'Flowermead' chapter or skipping it altogether.

The second strategy is, within chapters, to employ a chronological but discontinuous narrative technique I have come to call 'layering', which consists of overlapping, separated, or contiguous dramatically developed *morceaux choisis* or slices of life. James Boswell, Samuel Johnson's biographer, called them 'scenes'.³ According to one critic, the result of Boswell's technique was 'biography as intimate epic—strong narrative with a glamorous supporting cast and the loquacious warts-and-all hero at centre stage'. I do not aim for the scope of an epic, but hope that layering carefully chosen facts, images, and the words of others can suggest the plenitude and complexity of the subject's life.

The last strategy relates to the second. It is to facilitate reading by using prose that favours the concrete and descriptive. A concomitant technique is to imply my position by means of prefacing statements at the beginning of chapters (and sometimes within the text) and, especially, in not-always-contextualised indented quotations throughout, by Jolley and others, like the ones at the head of this Introduction. I intend by the facts and details to document and illustrate—the noise of children, the sounds of childhood, antiseptic fragrances, the sense of people and feelings becoming more distinct and urgent—and by layering to imply their scope, whether the supporting

cast is glamorous or homely, whether or not the scope becomes epic. I did not look for warts but included them when I found them, literally in the Sibford chapter and metaphorically elsewhere.

I am fascinated by detective work, by direction or indirection. It is thrilling when it answers central questions, like how many wives Jolley's maternal grandfather had and whether he was a general, a judge, both, or neither. It is frustrating when it hits dead ends: I was able to identify Jolley's colourful Anti Mote as one of her paternal grandmother's half-sisters, and I identified the boarding house where she lived in the 1920s, but I can only speculate on why Jolley represents her as having a German accent in 'One Christmas Knitting'. I found Jolley's mother's paternal grandfather's will, a key document, in the Rathaus in Vienna, unopened because it is fire-damaged and awaiting the development of preservation technologies that will one day make it available. And I could not locate, dead or alive, someone important to Jolley's life in Glasgow in the late 1950s, and so do not refer to that person by name here. Such detective work led me to realise how birth, marriage, death, census and voting records are to a biographer what DNA analysis is to a modern-day detective.

But detective work is always incomplete, its results always provisional and contingent. Biographers need to keep in mind that, even after long, careful, and fruitful research, what they know about the subject is not all there is to know nor even a very large percentage of what might be known. (My work on Kenneth Berrington is a good example of research that became more obviously incomplete the more I learned.) The greater part of the job involves deduction and induction, commonsensical and even counter-intuitive reasoning—biographers are not unlike a palaeontologist or zoologist with a few bones and a handful of teeth trying to determine the anatomy and physiology of some unknown animal. Thus the importance of learning to tolerate and even value certain unresolved questions, discontinuities and contradictions in order to draw a more nuanced portrait than that made by, so to speak, connecting all the dots to reveal one possible picture and then erasing all the other dots. A biographer's job is not to eliminate complexity but to contextualise it. As Vikram Seth writes in his biography of his uncle and aunt, he wanted them to be 'complexly remembered'.⁴

That detective work was facilitated by the personal and professional assistance of scores of people who generously helped me in the research and writing of this book, providing information by fax and phone, mail and email,

Introduction

and face-to-face interviews, often several of them. They include people as far-flung in space as the 1960s badminton champion of Borneo and an Iraqi orthopaedic surgeon now in Iran. And they include people far-flung in time, as it were: I was blessed to be able to interview Leonard Jolley's university love-from-afar from the mid-1930s as well as Elizabeth Jolley's English and Art teachers from the late 1930s.

My debt to such people, including many octogenarians and several nonagenarians, is immeasurable, for telling their stories was a matter of sooner or never, an example being the widow of a professor at the University of Western Australia who, knowing that she was dying, asked to be interviewed immediately, to say that neither she nor the other UWA faculty wives envied Jolley her success. Half of people interviewed were seventy or older, and nearly half of those people are now dead. Without their generosity and, often, special trust, many facts, stories and myths would not now be known or, if known, understood. Those who helped are recorded in the Acknowledgements section.

I am pleased to acknowledge Curtin University with thanks for several Australian Research Council and other grants awarded me over the course of my work; Paul Brunton, Senior Curator at the Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales, for kindness and material assistance he and his colleagues provided to me over the years I worked on Elizabeth Jolley materials in their possession; Margaret Allen, State Librarian for Western Australia, for permission to quote from the Battye Library transcript of Stuart Reid's 1988 interviews with Elizabeth Jolley; Bob and Jean Hazlehurst of Wolverhampton for their friendship and for helping me discover things about Wilfrid Knight and Kenneth Berrington I would never have found on my own; Sylvia Eisenreich, my translator and researcher in Vienna, whose genius was never to take yes for an answer; Caroline Lurie in Sydney, Elizabeth Jolley's first agent as well as her friend and confidante, whose subtle advice was invaluable; and Terri-ann White, Director of the University of Western Australia Press and friend of Elizabeth Jolley, whose continued support and enthusiasm for the project was critical; and her colleague Kate McLeod, editorial Manager, whose always cheerful support was equally critical.

I record my special gratitude to Madelaine Knight Blackmore, Elizabeth Jolley's sister. For years she patiently answered my questions, sometimes the same ones over and over, and always provided valuable information and new leads; she contributed photographs for the illustrations, and she also read the

chapters on Jolley's British years and critiqued them for fact and meaning. Having been her sister's partner in making up childhood stories in the 1920s and 1930s, in the past decade she was invaluable in helping to reconstruct that childhood and its sequel. Time and again she refocused my vision by insisting how the two sisters had two different experiences in the Knight household; and, through telling me hers, she helped me to gain perspectives and correctives on Jolley's versions. Madelaine Blackmore had, I should note, a great love of music and literature and had three stories broadcast over the BBC in recent years (see Works Cited). I am sorry she did not live to see this book in print after having contributed so much to it. She died 27 October 2007.

I must also thank Richard Jolley and Ruth Jolley Radley, Elizabeth Jolley's son and younger daughter, for generously answering questions about their family's time in Western Australia. Richard helped with photographs and was particularly helpful in relation to details of his mother's final illness. Ruth told of her early days in Perth with her mother, including the times when she sometimes worked with her in other people's homes.

It is not possible to thank Elizabeth Jolley who early on gave me to-whom-it-may concern letters in English and German as well as specific letters of introduction requesting those people I approached with them to share with me their memories and opinions along with supporting materials like letters and photographs; provided me with published and unpublished visual, written and taped materials (hers, her husband's, her parents', et al); and granted me access to her private papers, diaries, notebooks and letters in the Mitchell Library. Perhaps to encourage my work, she also gave me as a birthday present the William Makepeace Thackeray and Robert Louis Stevenson books that Kenneth Berrington's father gave him a hundred years ago and Berrington subsequently gave to Jolley. She always helped when I asked questions, but I tried to refrain from doing so.

Finally I must thank Barbara Milech, my partner and colleague, who participated in a decade of Elizabeth Jolley research with me, a labour of love. Her work on Jolley's writing formed the ballast of the critical discussions in this book, and her contribution to its final rewriting and editing was likewise a labour of love.

I followed the recommendation an anthropologist gave Isobel Fonseca when she told him that she wanted to conduct research on her Romany ancestors for a book about them, *Bury Me Standing*. 'Never ask any questions',

Introduction

he advised. ‘Asking is no way to get answers’.⁵ If mine was at least a foolhardy and more time-consuming technique than its obvious alternatives, it uncovered much information and elicited many insights that direct probing might have driven underground, perhaps forever. Although Jolley read or listened to drafts of the British years presented in this book, and occasionally corrected details, she never sought to change matters of substance. While fully supportive, she maintained an arm’s-length relationship to this project. Although Elizabeth Jolley was my friend and colleague for thirty years, this is neither a hagiography nor a panegyric: she would not want one, and I would not write one. This is my thanks to her.

When I began this work I imagined the result would be a history of Elizabeth Jolley’s life which documented, among other things, what she wrote, if and when/where it was published, and what was the critical and popular reaction to it. It became clear that her bibliography would be long, as would be the list of her literary awards and public commendations for her work. What I had not anticipated was how inextricably interrelated her life and work were. Nor had I anticipated the complexity of the relationship between Elizabeth and Leonard Jolley. I came to think of them as like a couple in a three-legged race: they might have looked mismatched, their progress proceeding by fits and starts, but they got on, they stayed the course, and neither could have done it without the other.

From her earliest days her parents modelled love, often heroically and usually badly. Jolley’s behaviour mimicked theirs to the finest details of their passions, from their different ways of being charitable, to their enactment of love in unconventional circumstances. But her writing did more. It minutely reflected on her behaviour and that of others, intuiting extraordinary ways of loving by ordinary people. She became a chronicler and a philosopher of love against all odds.

The title *Doing Life* comes from her story “‘Surprise! Surprise!’ from Matron” in her first book, *Five Acre Virgin*. There, 100-year-old Mrs Morgan who lives in a nursing home explains the absence of her imprisoned 100-year-old husband by saying that he is ‘doing life’.

All along, I have been mindful of Sigmund Freud’s saying, ‘Work and love, love and work—*Arbeit und Lieben*—that is all there is’. For Elizabeth Jolley, working and loving and writing were ‘doing life’.

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Note regarding names, spelling, formatting and quoting in the text:

Elizabeth Jolley, born Monica Elizabeth Knight, was always known as Bunti by her father and Bunty by her mother and her sister Madelaine (and also Bun by Madelaine); at school in the 1930s she was called Monica and various nicknames (especially Beaky); and during nurse training in the early 1940s she was usually called Knight; for a year or more after she left nursing she was Monica Fielding, having changed her name by deed poll, and then in the early 1950s she was Monica Jolley, having changed Fielding to Jolley on her ration books and identity card. She became Monica Elizabeth Jolley in December 1952 when she married Leonard Jolley and some time after that Elizabeth Jolley at the encouragement of Leonard Jolley. What she is called across these chapters changes with those name changes.

She called him Leonard or Leo to friends and, more directly to him, especially in her letters and diary, Sticks (variously spelled Stiks, Stxe, Styx and Stx), not referring the cane or stick he sometimes used for walking, but meaning clever as in the epithet Cleversticks used by British children. His nickname for her was Fish.

The spelling used here accords with the preferences of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, foreign words and phrases only italicised where they do not appear in it.

Elizabeth Jolley's private papers in the Mitchell Library in Sydney are embargoed until 2028 or until the death of all of her children, whichever is sooner. Although I sometimes rely on those papers, I do not quote directly from them here. The chronology of the narrative should provide sufficient direction for later researchers who might want to consult the letters/diaries relevant to the events, thoughts and actions referred to in the narrative. Any materials quoted in the text are not part of the embargoed materials in the Mitchell.



‘Flowermead’—The fury haunting the family...

I suppose I loved him.

Wilfred Knight’s student

I wanted to be just like her.

Margarete Knight’s neighbour

What kind of marriage can spring from the moving sight of Goethe’s Werther first observing the youthful and charming Lotte distributing slices of bread at dusk to the small children in her care? My father first beheld my mother in a similar pose but in very different circumstances. She was sharing out soup and bread amongst her near-starving pupils in a school in Vienna...He was distributing food and clothes.

“What Sins to Me Unknown Dipped Me in Ink?” (2)

Elizabeth Jolley—Monica Elizabeth Knight—was a normal child, if her first letter to Father Christmas is any indication, for she asked that her pillow case be filled to the top. She also showed an early interest in arts and crafts when her second Christmas letter asked for a paint box, a children’s book, a school book, a skipping rope, another book, and a carpenter set. And the Knight family was a normal one, if intimacy problems between husband and wife were normal in their day. But it was not a happy family.

What tightly bound Charles Wilfrid Knight—called Wilfrid—and Margarete Fehr Knight was their lack of self-esteem deriving from their

different family-of-origin experiences. Her sense of worthlessness related to her feeling of abandonment caused by her mother's early death and by her father's devotion to two successive stepmothers, the second driving her out of the household. His related to his rejection by a self-centred father and an at least complicit mother who favoured their daughter and threw him out of the house for what others might have regarded as his selfless, if not heroic, commitment to the Seventh Commandment.

It was not a marriage of opposites but rather one of diabolically complementary personalities. Margarete Knight's way of dealing with her lack of self-esteem was to attract attention through flamboyance, flattery, and unpredictable bursts of anger. Wilfrid Knight's was to seek approval through self-effacement and service to others. Both did so through their teaching, she through her friendship circle and he through his pastoral work—she baked cakes to put on the table, and he cast bread upon the waters. She endured his absence while ministering to people they did not even know, and he tolerated her over-familiarity or rejective behaviour with visitors, friends, and family, attempting to mediate between and among them—she was narcissistic, and he was placatory. He suppressed anger, and she withheld affection. The whole time they worked to maintain the appearance of a normal middle-class household, and they were largely successful in doing so. Each was remembered with admiration and often affection by many people who knew them, and only a few detected signs of conflict and distress.

Kenneth Berrington played an important role in the Knight household. For more than twenty years his presence functioned like the central wall in the family structure, acknowledged but not questioned for the fact that, while holding it up, it also kept family members apart. After Berrington's death in 1953, with both Knight daughters moved away from the Midlands, the parents had to live together as if for the first time. By then their behaviour had become ritualised, and they accepted their relationship as normal, although they both knew that it was not perfect. Long before that, their daughters knew that it was more like a marriage made in Hell than Heaven, but that realisation only came after their participation in the family constellation, the experiences of two sisters seeming almost as if they lived in different families.

A similarity for each was trying to reconcile the double message resulting from the fact that Berrington sometimes acted like their father's brother

and sometimes like their mother's lover, making the father look like a good friend or a great fool. And a difference was the experience of trying to mediate between their parents' attempts at triangulation whereby Wilfrid or Margarete Knight would strive, consciously or unconsciously, to enlist one of the children as an ally in opposition to the other parent. In "What Sins" she wrote, 'My mother was given to moods. Storms blew up unexpectedly, were savage and disappeared again as quickly . . . I became by nature and circumstance a placator and learned to read every change in the eye, every crease in the brow. I am still a placator' (6). Her sister likewise became a placator in her own way.

It was with reason that, having described Margarete as Lotte and Wilfrid as Werther in Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, she wrote in "What Sins" that it was a 'deeply moving scene but not a good guide to marriage' (2).

Wilfrid Knight was an introspective, serious-minded man descended from no-nonsense Methodist dawn-to-dusk dairying people from Winterslow, near Salisbury. He told a story of himself as a boy coming across sparrows trapped in a strawberry net and, on impulse, beating them to death with a stick. Unlike Shakespeare's boys who blithely pulled the wings off flies, he reflected deeply on the event, he said, and made his first significant life-changing decision: he renounced evil and determined to live a life based on the concept of the good. That seriousness is also reflected in another story he told, of knocking on the door of Berggasse 19 in Vienna and asking Sigmund Freud to make him a psychoanalyst.¹ His idealism was attentive to soul and psyche equally.

Wilfrid's father, also Charles Knight, was a dairyman-cum-Methodist lay preacher who married Martha 'Patti' Thrippleton from Leeds, a schoolmistress. They lived in Wells, Somerset, where he sold watered-down milk and delivered full-strength sermons. Wilfrid, born in 1890, and his sister Daisy, born two years later, attended the Blue School as charity cases, their blue uniforms signifying humility and gratitude to the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge which ran the school. Terribly shy and badly bullied at school, he became ill every day at the prospect of having to go there, his mother solving the problem by asking if he wanted to go before or after she belted him. He and Daisy were good enough students to become pupil-teachers, a practice of the time whereby some older students

were chosen to teach classes of younger ones. By 1912, at twenty-two, he had progressed to being a student-teacher at the Wells Elementary School where he had more than fifty students in his classroom. In his twenties he was also a Methodist lay preacher.

At twenty-seven, when he was drafted into the army, he made a second life-changing decision: handed a soldier's uniform, he would not put it on. Tried for refusing an order, he declared himself a pacifist, declining to serve on the grounds of conscientious objection. As a result he was sentenced to nine months of hard labour wearing His Majesty's Prison Wormwood Scrubs number 5018 on his uniform, prisoner 5016 ironically given only six months for being 'an unauthorised person wearing [a] military uniform'. Later he explained that 'The Sermon on the Mount shows that ALL war is wrong whatever the special circumstances may be'.²

He was placed in solitary confinement for a fortnight and after that had to work in silence, forbidden from looking out the window, on a diet formulated to strip prisoners of their body fat so that they could better appreciate their freezing conditions. Each time his sentence expired, he was handed a uniform to put on, again declining, until he had served two years or more, and they discharged him nonetheless. Perhaps the Governor was embarrassed by a guest who, refusing to call him 'Sir', pointed out that all men were equal in the eyes of God. Or perhaps he eventually discharged his obstinate inmate because Knight, impressed by the Quaker chaplain, made his third life-changing decision, to commit to the principles of the Society of Friends (although he never officially became a Quaker). The Governor did not need any more friends like that.

Released from prison, he went straight to the home of his parents who were living at 7 Claremont Road, Sparkbrook, three miles southeast of Birmingham, where he might have hoped to be welcomed after his principled sacrifice to the sanctity of human life. Instead his father disowned him and, as Patti Knight stood by, threw him into the street with a shilling for good riddance. Unable to free himself from the powerful grip of his family, he took a room with the Rose family at 24 Claremont Road.

Eventually he found a teaching job in Caernarvon, Wales, a stroke of luck, since COs were despised at large, the authorities threatening to send whole platoons of them to the European front as cannon fodder. In Wales he fell in love with his landlady's daughter, an affair that eventually went bad—later,

whenever he referred to someone as Welsh, he was being disparaging. When they broke up, he set off to meet Freud in Austria.

‘Young man, I do not have the time and you do not have the money’.

Sigmund Freud to Wilfrid Knight

In Vienna he met his wife-to-be while she was teaching kindergarten in an experimental class being run by the University of Vienna. She was Margarete ‘Grete’ Johanna Carolina Fehr, born in 1896, by some accounts as Baroness von Fehr.³ Six years younger than Wilfrid Knight, she was a romantic young woman who at twelve had followed a tall, blond, athletic-looking man through the wintry streets of Vienna’s Town Hall and Museum Quarters, becoming lost until she saw ‘the church with two spires’. The man was Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian scientist then famous for his exploration of Greenland and his Arctic Ocean experiments, and Votivkirche, the church with two spires, stood a few hundred yards from Margarete Fehr’s home. It was a large residential building at the intersection of Florianigasse and Landesgerichtstrasse in the Josephstadt District, on the northwest quadrant of Vienna’s elegant Ringstrasse, just a few hundred yards from the Rathaus.

Wilfrid Knight was no Nansen but rather an out-of-work schoolteacher whose prospects were limited on account of his having been a conscientious objector. But he was tall, handsome and athletic, a man who enjoyed hiking, cycling and boxing. Referred to in Austria as ‘Professor’, he was intelligent, high-minded and well educated, with a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of London and plans for further study. His interest in theology complemented hers in philosophy (she admired Seneca); they both enjoyed learning languages, his being French and German—his German good enough to converse with her—and hers French and Italian. And, like Nansen, he was a foreigner. She had a penchant for foreign, exotic or high-achieving men, like her Czech boyfriend of whom her brother disapproved and of whom she eventually tired, later saying *‘Trau shau Wen, / Aber nur kein Böhm’* (‘Trust, but watch whom, and never a Bohemian’).

Her father, Walter Fehr, was a general and a judge, she said, her ancestors members of the Swiss court in the 1600s. The family’s wealth and status were reflected in the apartment building at Florianigasse 2 in central Vienna, but the truth of the Fehrs was more like that of the

eponymous Buddenbrooks family in Thomas Mann's 1901 novel. According to the Buddenbrooks Principle, one generation makes a fortune, the second consolidates it, and the third loses it, in the Fehr's case three generations of Josephs. In the eighteenth century Joseph Xavier Fehr started a weaving business that produced 'Manchester' goods in Fischamend, southeast of Vienna, enabling him to purchase Florianigasse 2 as his second residence; his son Joseph Deri Fehr moved the business from Fischamend to Vienna where he made value-added *Modewaren* (finished garments and accessories); and the last Joseph was Grete Fehr's grandfather Joseph Edward Fehr, once called *ein stadtbekannter Sonderling*—a widely known eccentric.⁴ By the time of her father's generation, remnants of the family, like his older sister Johanna Fehr Bukowsky and her husband, were living, perhaps by usufruct, in one of the twenty once-elegant apartments in the still-elegant Florianigasse building.

Walter Fehr was neither a general nor a judge. He gained his engineering degree but failed his medical examination for military service, and so was a *Kaiserlich und Koeniglicher Oberrevident der Bundesbahnen* or state railway station worker during World War I. There was no general. But that did not stop Grete Fehr from fashioning one in her mind out of her grandfather's two brothers, Karl and Alexander. In 1854, as a young man, Karl served on a ship commanded by Austria's iconic Admiral Wilhelm von Tegetthoff, but not in battle, and he never rose higher than lieutenant—Tegetthoff said he should not be promoted until he had more experience and enthusiasm. But just having served with Tegetthoff would lend a man considerable reflected glory.⁵ As for Alexander, he had a chestful of medals when he concluded his career as General-Commissär in charge of Department VIII of the War Ministry's Marine Section in Vienna. But his main service was in an accounts area, he never saw battle, and his awards were of the kind, naval historians joke, given to anyone who does not commit suicide. He was only adjectivally a general rather than substantively an admiral, although he was the equivalent of an Australian rear admiral.⁶ It seems that near enough was close enough for Grete Fehr to amalgamate two of her grandfather's naval brothers into one army general.

Nor was her father a judge. But his father, Joseph Edward Fehr, held a doctorate in jurisprudence and (another in philosophy) from the University of Vienna, and was briefly a lawyer during his two years in the navy in the 1860s. Although if he actually practiced law in civilian life, he never

served on the bench.⁷ He likened himself to Diogenes the Cynic, the anti-establishment Greek philosopher who went about Athens with a lantern during the day looking for an honest man—except that, especially as he grew older, Joseph Fehr kept to his room by day and only came out at night. The title of Doctor of Law, his impressive central-city residence of seven rooms on two floors, and the fact that Florianigasse 2 was immediately around the corner from the Landesgericht or Provincial Court might have sustained his being called 'judge' as a term of affectionate respect, or even pity, by some family members or neighbours.⁸

Grete Fehr's symbolic elevation of her father Walter to the bridge and the bench accorded with his being an intellectual and glamorous figure. Rudolph Steiner, the anthroposophist, was his friend. He gave the eulogy at the funeral of Walter's father, Joseph Edward Fehr, and was in love with Walter's younger sister Radegunde whom he alluded to in one of his plays—after they broke up, he wrote to her saying 'we both very well knew it, but we could not overcome the timidity to say that we loved each other. And so love lived between the words we spoke with each other, but not in those words'.⁹ Walter Fehr and Steiner parted because of some quarrel over theology.¹⁰

And a drama unfolded as Walter Fehr serially married three women progressively younger than himself, the last one twenty-nine when he was forty-eight. The first produced Grete's brother Walter, the second a stepbrother, and the third a stepsister. The first two wives died of illness early in their marriages, thereby depriving Grete of maternal affection and leaving her to compete with her brother and a stepbrother for her father's attention. Bad blood existed between Grete and her second stepmother from the beginning: when she was the flower girl at Walter Fehr's marriage to Aloisia Noster, fourteen-year-old Grete vomited on the altar; after the birth of Aloisia's baby, they quarrelled to the point that Noster struck her, sending her to board with nuns in a *Klosterschule*; and after that she lived with Tante Johanna Bukowsky at Florianigasse 2. Indeed, bad blood existed between Walter Fehr and his wife Aloisia to the extent that, according to one record, she divorced him before their child Johanna 'Hansi' Fehr was born or, according to another, two years after his death . . . In Oedipal terms, Grete was progressively displaced from the centre of her father's affections, not only by two stepmothers of the wicked variety, but also by their siblings. As a result, in adult life she had difficulty sharing her household with women and always sought the attention of men rather than women.

She was living with Tante Joh in apartment #20 at Florianigasse 2 and teaching at the University of Vienna when Wilfrid Knight visited, having been working with Quakers who were running post-World War I relief programs in a ruined Vienna. The poor and the rich alike suffered from the contagious diseases spread by turn-of-the century urbanisation—scarlet fever, diphtheria, tuberculosis—a situation accentuated by the privations and dangers of World War I, the influenza pandemic of 1918 which killed 30 million people worldwide, and the famine that killed thousands in Vienna. Even disregarding deaths in infancy, the average life span of Margarete Fehr's extended family was just under fifty. She and her bourgeois family also experienced wartime privation—her brother became tubercular, and many of the kindergarten pupils she was teaching when she met Wilfrid Knight were afflicted with rickets, angrily called *die englische Krankheit*, the English disease.

They were married 13 July 1922 (the feast of Saint Margaret of Antioch), when he was thirty-two and she was twenty-six, in the First Methodist Church in Vienna. She is not listed as a Baroness, her name recorded simply as Margareta [sic] Fehr.¹¹ Handwritten in the Knight family bible are the words, '*Ich will dich segnen, und du vollst ein Segen sein*': 'I will bless you, and you will be blessed'.¹²

Be kind to her, because she is young and very spoiled.

Johanna Fehr Bukowsky to Wilfrid Knight¹³

Wilfrid Knight brought his new bride to the West Midlands by the end of the summer of 1922 where he had the good fortune to secure a teaching job for the fall term in the day school of the Sir Josiah Mason Orphanage in Erdington, about five miles northeast of central Birmingham. They lived nearby at 'The Ferns' with a Mrs Margaret Moore, a widow with two young children, from whom they rented rooms.¹⁴

They were still living at 'The Ferns' when Monica Elizabeth Knight was born at The Norlands Maternity and Surgical Nursing Home on 4 June 1923. And they were there when her sister Madelaine Winifred was born at The Norlands on 20 August 1924, although her birth certificate shows their home as 23 Harman Road, Erdington. That was the address of the Wynns, friends whose doctor Margarete used, the doctor believing Madelaine would

die; she was so frail because of an oesophageal problem that she had to be fed intravenously. So the Wynns welcomed the mother and baby into their home, and they stayed there for several months while Madelaine gained strength.

Madelaine's nickname was 'Baba', after what Monica first called her. Monica's nickname was 'Bunti' (Wilfrid's spelling) or 'Bunt' (Margarete's), from the old nursery rhyme:

Bye, baby bunting,
Daddy's gone a-hunting,
To get a little rabbit's skin
To wrap a baby bunting in.

Years later Wilfrid Knight wrote, 'You were named Monica, after Monica Ewer, who was a well-known writer at the time of your birth', but then he added, 'M[other] says NO, you were named after Monica Mother of Saint Augustine'.¹⁵ He later added that Elizabeth was chosen because it was the name of the mother of John the Baptist and also of the thirteenth-century Landgräfin or Countess of Thuringa. More prosaically, Madelaine always assumed her sister's second name referred to their grandmother, Martha Elizabeth Thrippleton.

When Monica was seven months old, Margarete Knight took her to meet the Fehr family in Vienna where she visited with her few remaining relatives, her beloved Tante Joh, her father Walter, and her brother Walter. She would not see any of them on the two subsequent trips she took to Vienna in the 1930s, for Johanna died in 1927 and her father in 1928, and she became estranged from her brother who, whatever the will might have said, refused to share their father's estate with her. She had been jealous of him since his birth and later angry that her father put so much money into his son/her brother, paying for Walter's horse, sword, uniform and lodging when he was a dragoon in the army. Effectively, her family connection to Austria was severed on her return to England in 1924.

Upon the birth of Monica Knight, her grandfather Charles Knight's controlling and judgemental nature continued to make itself felt, his first Christmas letter enclosing ten shillings with an exhortation to save, one with a sting in the tail: 'Waste not, want not', he wrote, telling Monica that 'to be clever without being good is disappointing, so you must try to be both, like your father used to be'. Later letters indirectly told her father to resume

his work as a Methodist lay preacher, and not to have more children: he was using her like a ventriloquist's dummy in order to address her parents, infantilising his son and delivering outrageous opinions about his wife—'I expect she was born naughty; tell her whilst it is "never too late to mend" it is better to mend early than late'.¹⁶ Virtually from birth, Monica seems to have been conditioned to become a placator, a repeated self-description of hers.

Her grandfather's letters are symptomatic of Wilfred Knight's powerfully conflicted family. There were titanic shouting matches between them all when Daisy was young and, after the parents' death, comparable ones between the never-married Daisy and the live-in housekeeper Mrs Clayton. In later years, Wilfrid Knight found it difficult to visit Daisy because it was so emotionally draining for him to do so.

Margarete Knight had problems with Daisy too, finding her spoiled, dogmatic, and self-absorbed, like Charles Knight. When Daisy died peacefully in her chair in 1965, Margarete said that her will 'was all over the place', making bequests to fourteen people, which was true but none of her business; and she said Daisy gave away silverware meant for Monica, which was untrue. But her feelings are made quite clear in 'One Christmas Knitting', when she says 'Anti Daisy should have drowned slowly with all her sins floating in front of her and herself weighted down with Grannie's silver spoons . . .' (118). The strength of those feelings reveals that she did not feel part of the Knight family, and not without reason. That feeling of being like an orphan was magnified by her memory of being symbolically excluded from her natal family at the time of her father's death when her brother refused to share the estate with her.

My father with his fine white teeth and thick hair suggested, in his appearance, a life in England which would restore prosperity and social status. My mother confessed later to imagining that she would live in a large country house set in its own park. The England of her hopes did not turn out to be as expected. My father was a teacher in the heart of England's Industrial Midlands, the Black Country, an area of coal mines, brick works, iron and steel foundries, factories and rows of mean little houses in narrow streets.

"What Sins to Me Unknown Dipped Me in Ink" (4)

After their children were born, the Knights moved to 'Flowermead', so named by the grandfather. The closest Margarete would ever come to a

large country home, it was a newly built bungalow on a half-acre block in the triangle formed by Walmley, Hollyfield and Reddicap Heath Roads in Sutton Coldfield. It was not a country house with its own park but rather one built on clay that Margarete Knight said caused the girls earaches; it did not have electricity, but used gas lamps and had a gas ring in the fireplace for cooking. But it had a nice garden and a small pool.¹⁷

In "What Sins" 'Flowermead' is remembered as a very small house but with a big garden, cherry trees, blackcurrant bushes and raspberry canes. There was piano music and Schubert Lieder, '[t]hen the music changed and someone sang "*How do you feel when you marry your ideal / Ever so goosey goosey goosey*". And someone else sang "The Wedding of the Painted Doll"'. [The] mother 'danced twirling her beads, strings of them; she danced kicking her feet out to the sides, heels up, toes down and turned in. Across the room she danced, across the room and back' (8). But there was a void in what should have been a happy scene, Monica and Madelaine often told to be quiet because their father was writing a book.¹⁸ At other times, 'My father sat with one hand shading his eyes but I saw his tears' (8)—he later told them that his prison experiences gave him a persecution complex, making him feel unworthy to own a home, and even causing him frequently to change lodgings when travelling. The experience went back to his time in Wormwood Scrubs and his father's subsequently humiliating him, not for Wilfrid's pacifism but for Charles' belief, 'in the disgrace of being in prison' (4). Wilfrid Knight was often caught in a double bind.

Life at 'Flowermead' was a rite of passage with several trials for Margarete Knight who had no household skills, little English, and socialisation only within her own conflicted family before and after the war. Ilse Gaugusch, an Austrian family friend, once suggested any woman from the continent could pass as good cook in England, but the result of Margarete's first effort, frying a roast, was such a disaster that even Mrs Moore's dog would not eat it. And sometimes her language and culinary efforts got confused, as when she told a German girl staying with them to add an eye to the soup, *ei* being 'egg' in German. But pride and determination soon turned her into a competent cook whose specialty was *guglhupf*, a rich cake baked in a *bundt* pan, an elixir and catholicon. Likewise, her facility at languages enabled her to improve her English rapidly, and ultimately she became highly fluent (although she retained an accent); she went on to study Hebrew to converse with refugees during World War II and, much later, took up Norwegian. Her home,

particularly her kitchen and dining room, became a place of power from which she could dispense or withhold both nurture and nutriment.

At first her social circle was her family of marriage, not a circle in which one would want to be trapped forever: her father-in-law referred to her as 'that foreign woman', her mother-in-law would not allow her to use the shampoo (it was reserved for Daisy), and Daisy was unpleasant to everyone. They not only treated their daughter-in-law like a migrant from a country England was at war with but like the enemy itself. Of course, Bunty and Baba perceived Charles Knight differently: '[m]y grandfather in the heyday of his hernia walked, to save the fare, from Birmingham to Sutton Coldfield carrying a cot and a mattress on his back. Setting down the cot at the back door he brought, straight from his boots, cracked hazel-nuts which he held out to me on the palm of his hand'—'[i]t is not everyone who has had an old man walking with nuts in his boots and carrying a cot' ('On War' 13).

Like Joseph Edward Fehr, that is the kind of grandfather who is remembered as a mythic figure but, whereas Fehr was eccentric, Knight was lugubrious. He would invite his granddaughters to look through the bedroom door at their sleeping grandmother, saying that she would be dead soon; he asked them to speculate on how many young girls were killed on the highways by runaway horses; and he encouraged them to contemplate how long, at the current rate of production, it would take before the streets would be completely blocked with horse manure'.¹⁹ Nor were his attempts at humour any more cheering: he would hold out a farthing for each but, when they took them, he asked for them back—the grandmother explained he was just showing the coins to them, that 'it was his way of being funny'.²⁰ Charles Knight died at seventy-seven in 1937 as dramatically as he lived, by pouring boiling water from a kettle on himself during an epileptic fit, subsequently developing blood poisoning from which he died in hospital'.²¹

Fortunately, while they were at 'Flowermead', the Knights also made a number of acquaintances who welcomed Margarete Knight and who, if anything, celebrated her European background and culture. Their new social circle was a virtual menagerie of consanguineous, mysterious, ersatz and honorary relatives. As for the family, '[m]others may point at Aunt Daisy and say, "see for yourself the peculiarities which are bound to be repeated" and often, in hushed and dropped voices, poor cousin Dorothy will be mentioned but no one will say exactly what Aunt Daisy did or what happened to Dorothy' ('The Changing Family' 82).²² Monica thought

that Daisy taught embroidery and needlework, but Madelaine was certain it was art, and one cousin speculated that she taught languages since she studied for a year in Grenoble, while still another imagined that she was a mathematician since her will was split into fourteenths. Dorothy, 'said to be mad' in "What Sins" (1), was her grandfather's youngest brother Stanley's daughter, a sad, 'nervous' woman sometimes looked after by a cousin and sometimes by the Wolverhampton Knights: such troubled people, as well as ageing parents and grandparents, are movingly invoked in 'Dignity, Composure and Tranquility'.

Then there was Anti Mote, the former word being the girls' perverse version of 'Aunty', the latter Margarete Knight's Germanic pronunciation of Maud. She was an eccentric, if not mentally unwell, woman whom Monica or Madelaine would return home to find sleeping in the bed of one of them. Her visits inevitably enlivened the household and often scandalised the neighbourhood. Maud was brought home by policemen for stealing the timetables and passenger lists off buses or for sunbaking in the nude in a public park in winter; and Madelaine remembered their mother returning home on a cold day to see that Maud had set Madelaine, naked, in the open front window so that she too could enjoy the benefits of sunbaking. Most touchingly, there is the story of Maud trying to pick flowers off the hallway wallpaper when the family was moving from 'Flowermead' to their second home ('One Christmas' 125). Maud also found her way into the fiction, when one sister 'watched Anti Mote comb out and cut off Pretty's [the other sister's] hair till there was only a tuft on top like a turnip' ('Clever' 200).

Aunti Mote was one of their grandmother's younger, unmarried half-sisters, Annie Maud Thrippleton.²³ Women like Dorothy and Maud led the adult Monica Knight to wonder about mental instability in the family, another odd relative being Charles Knight's brother William's wife Sophia who went into 'emotional decline' around 1900. Her fears were probably genetically unfounded but nonetheless understandable, for histrionic real and pseudo family members lurched in and out of the Knights' family life.

The ersatz relatives were also called 'uncle' or 'aunt' for acting more like relatives than most neighbours or friends might do. Prominent among them were Acheson and Mary Sheldon of Erdington who had two daughters, Betty and Norah, about ten years older than the Knight girls. Wilfrid met the Sheldons through Betty who was his day student at Sir Josiah Mason's—they lived at 727 Chester Road, Erdington, just a few blocks from the orphanage,

an address memorialised in ‘Strange Regions There Are’ (118-20). The Sheldons had an au pair girl living with them, Marie Stapf from Germany, and so they introduced her to newly arrived Margarete Knight. The Sheldons also introduced the Knights to their friends and neighbours the Wynns, William and Elsie and their daughter Margaret, who lived in the next street to the Sheldons at 23 Harmon Road. The Wynns were the people who took Margarete and Madelaine into their home for a few months after Madelaine was born.

The three men shared a passion for motorcycles, the families also joined by their various interests in and experiences with Quakerism, pacifism, music and languages: Sheldon was hounded from Nottingham University for being a pacifist, and a sympathetic Will Wynn, Head of Maths/Physics at Aston Technical College in Birmingham, hired him to teach electrical engineering to young men who, alas, would make and deploy munitions. Even their subsets generated lively conversation, Wynn and Sheldon both undergoing psychoanalysis and Sheldon a being a subset of one as a nudist. An older member of the group was Marie Stapf’s actual uncle but otherwise an honorary Knight uncle, Viennese Dr Otto Stapf, Keeper of the Herbarium at Kew Gardens. His wife was the mysterious Aunt Martha whose air baths and ominous talk about the head-high watermark in the hallway from the Thames in flood kept Monica Knight awake when, as a four- or five-year-old girl, she stayed with them in London (‘Silent Night’ 80).

The Sheldon household then and later figured large in her imagination. She later said they ‘were intellectual, intelligent, cultivated people and discussions in their homes “shaped” me even before I could understand’.²⁴ An example appears ‘727 Chester Road’²⁵ where she recalls puzzling over the brass plate by Aunt Mary’s front door, imagining the abbreviation ‘MusB(Singing)’ to mean ‘*Must Be Singing*’. In the same essay she implies that the Sheldon household made her feel special in a way that her own did not, as when Mary Sheldon played Mussorgsky’s *Gopak* for her:

It seemed to me then, as it does now, to be very special—this having the piano played especially for me. I mean, my being the only person in the room and the piano player turning to me and smiling while she played. Not smiling only with her lips, smiling and smiling with her eyes and with her shoulders and with her hands. She said the music was a sort of little dance.

‘Strange Regions There Are’ (119)

In addition to music and 'a great deal of affection which continued during my life', she said that the Sheldon household 'gave me "more speech"'—she instanced Betty Sheldon's saying 'knickers' in the presence of her father, after seeing a woman they knew wearing a white summer dress through which her bright green underwear showed.

Biographical and autobiographical details from the 1920s and 1930s routinely appear in Monica Knight's juvenilia and in her adult fiction. In 'Her First Minuet', a story she wrote in Form IV when she was sixteen, sixteen-year-old Anne Kemmeter appears in her special dress, hair piled in ringlets and powdered: 'A more beautiful sight can hardly be imagined'—Kemmeter was the married surname of Marie Stapf whom Monica Knight visited in Hamburg in the summer of 1939, on the eve of World War II. Thirty years later, Betty Sheldon's green knickers appear in a never-published novel, one with a woman named Krammer as its main character, Krammer being Margarete Knight's mother's family name. And Mary Wynn's piano playing is given to staff nurse Ramsden in *My Father's Moon* (65).

After three or four years in 'Flowermead', from 1925 to 1928, when Monica and Madelaine attended the Reddicap Heath Infants School, the Knights moved three times in about as many years, each time some two–three miles from Wolverhampton. First they rented a semi-detached house in Coalway Road, Penn Fields, southwest of Wolverhampton, a house called 'Barclay' (named by the grandfather after the bank). After a year or so they moved to a house in Bunkers Hill Lane, Bilston, southeast of Wolverhampton, a house they called 'Newton' (after the physicist). There Wilfrid Knight taught at Bilston Boys' Central School, and Monica attended Bradmore School for a few weeks and Bilston Girls' School for a few months, both spells in 1931, after which home schooling commenced. Then, in 1932, they rented at 63 Wells Road, also southwest of Wolverhampton, a bungalow they once more called 'Newton'. Finally, in 1939, they rented 62 Wells Road, the house across the street; it was the one which Margarete Knight preferred because, she said, she had always liked the people who lived there. They lived there the rest of their lives, purchasing it in 1956 with Mr Berrington's money.

Saints are very nice in heaven but I am not sure that earth is the right place for them.

Ilse Gaugusch of Wilfrid Knight²⁶

If Wilfrid and Margarete Knight's new circle of friends offered them the opportunity to socialise, sharing ideas and pleasantries, looking after each other's children and the like, their life at home soon revealed differences between them that their brief courtship in Vienna did not give them time to discover. Those differences related to culture, religion, politics and the myriad practices informed by them.

Wilfrid Knight's religious attitude was inclusive, optimistic, and progressive, endorsing reconciliation between Anglicans and Methodists, sure Satan could be saved if he existed, and believing we never knowingly choose evil but consciously or unconsciously rationalise our actions—he insisted, in Mme de Staël's phrase, that 'to know all is to forgive all'.

He cultivated Quaker openness to the 'inner light' which could be exasperating as well as awe-inspiring, as Ilse Gaugusch, an atheistic, straight-talking family friend, discovered: while rowing on the River Severn in the 1940s, their boat got stuck and so Knight, who could not push it off with his oar, closed his eyes and announced, 'I will pray'. As workmen looked down and laughed at them, Gaugusch gave the Lord a few minutes, then tucked her skirt into her knickers, got out of the boat, and pushed them off. She challenged, 'Your prayers didn't do much good, did they?' 'Oh yes', he said, 'because it was God who made you get out of the boat!'²⁷

Ideologically, he was a Socialist who endorsed Marx's credo, 'From every one according to his ability. To every one according to his need'.²⁸ Politically, he was liberal, passionately opposed to racism and, in his own way, to sexism ('most people received their early education from a woman').²⁹ And his unequivocal pacifism was lifelong: when Ilse Gaugusch asked what he would do if someone attacked his granddaughter, he again said, 'I would pray'. She refrained from asking her next question, 'And if they killed her, what would you think afterwards?'³⁰

By contrast, Margarete Knight, if not an atheist, was at least an agnostic.³¹ She set definite limits on her religious tolerance, especially for Roman Catholics—she disapproved of the Irish Catholic man her daughter Madelaine married and was shocked in her old age to learn that a friend was Roman Catholic. She was openly critical of her husband's public displays of Christianity, which she considered 'overdone', and she was especially vocal about the amount of time and money he devoted to 'good works', his annually giving away his overcoat like Saint Martin of Tours making her furious.³² One by one he also gave away both of his motorcycles to men he thought needed them more.