



“atmosphere,” perhaps because it began with the striking phrase (which has always remained with me) “We live in an ocean of air.” I can still visualize the curiously unsettling photograph of a chubby young man imprisoned up to his chest in a curious airtight box. He is yawning away, so the photograph’s caption declares, “not because he is tired, but because he is not receiving enough oxygen through his skin.” My favorite volume, *The Rock Book*, no longer in my possession, alas!, had probably been bought for me by my father because of my liking (which I have never lost) for those miniature collections of rock fragments—“jewels in the rough”—attractively displayed on cards and obtainable in tourist gift shops. The sonorous names of these minerals—chalcedony, quartz, obsidian, turquoise, alabaster, agate, jasper, malachite, beryl, jet, galena—still echo in my memory. Another book, *Chess the Easy Way*, by the outstanding American chess player Reuben Fine, and which, I am happy to say, still occupies an honoured place on my shelves, was given to me, as its inscription testifies, by a Mr. Thackwell, a friend of my father’s (I think). The inscription reads: “To John Bell Jr., from Larry Thackwell. I hope you will be as good a chess player as Reuben Fine, and I think you will be if you stay with it.” Given my subsequent lack of achievement at the chessboard, it is less than surprising that the serious chess players I was to meet in later life found these words risible. Nevertheless I treasure them—and the book in which they are inscribed—as a moving token of the past.

We had spent less than a year in New York when my father was offered a job in Rome with the Arabian-American Oil Company Aramco, the cartel controlling the bulk of the world’s oil production at that time. As an aficionado of all things Latin, my mother must have welcomed our move to Italy, and as a liberal she must also have been relieved to escape the anticommunist hysteria then sweeping the United States. In Rome my mnemonic fog begins to lift a little. I can remember, for instance, the address of our apartment: Via Nomentana 222 (*due cento venti due*). I also recall being sent initially to the International School of Rome, an establishment providing an attenuated form of instruction for the offspring of busy foreign diplomats, actors, and other peripatetic achievers sojourning in that city. In my case the curriculum apparently failed to extend beyond basic spelling and the multiplication table, both of which, as a normal seven-year-old, I had already mastered. My parents must therefore have felt it necessary to place me in a more stimulating scholarly environment. So it was that I was sent to Marymount<sup>1</sup>, an international Catholic day school staffed by anglophone nuns. Although the details of day-to-day attendance there escape my recollection, I recall enjoying both Roman history and my

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<sup>1</sup> The continued existence of this school is confirmed by its Internet entry.

first exposure to Latin. I have retained only a vague impression of the crude likenesses I drew, in orange exercise-books, of the various Roman ruins I was taken to see, but the strong smell of urine in the passages of the Colosseum still lingers in my nostrils. I was also struck by the legend of Mucius Scaevola, who, to show his indifference to death, thrust his hand into the fire and allowed it to be burnt off.

Still vivid is the memory of my burgeoning stamp (*francobolli*) collection, of which, as the following episode shows, I was absurdly possessive. At that time, my parents were, as Americans in postwar Europe, in the enviable position of being able to afford to employ a resident maid. This was Maria, with whom, as far as I can remember, I got along very well. On returning from some family excursion—perhaps to the beach at Fregene or at Ostia, which latter I recall had black sand—I was dismayed to find that my stamp album, bulging on our departure with what I regarded as philatelic gems, had been stripped bare. After a frantic search, the missing stamps were found sandwiched between the pair of mattresses on one of the beds in the apartment. Since Maria had been left “in charge” in our absence, she was quizzed about the curious affair, and finally admitted that she had removed and hidden the stamps “as a joke” on me. I naturally accepted this story at face value, until I discovered, on refixing the stamps in the album, that several of my favourites—from Afghanistan or Tannu Tuva, or other exotic places—were absent. Upset, I informed my parents, who, familiar with my philatelic fixation, decided simply to humour me. This seems to have led to the theory that, guided by an accomplice (a student of Stanley Gibbons, presumably), Maria had extracted the more valuable of the stamps she had removed from the album before hiding the rest. On discovery the affair was—so the scenario presumably continued—to be passed off as a joke on the young squirt (*ragazzo*), who would be unlikely to notice the absence of a mere handful of stamps. I cannot recall whether the correctness of this theory was ever established, nor whether Maria remained with us after the event, but neither circumstance seems likely.

I have just a few fragmentary further memories of our stay in Rome<sup>2</sup>. I recall being told by my parents that they had bought for me a complete (hardback) set of Franklin W. Dixon’s “Hardy Boys” mysteries from a couple who had apparently obtained them originally for the amusement of *their* son. It was only natural that the unthumbed condition of these books should have led me to infer that their original recipient had taken only minimal interest in them—an indifference, if such it was, perhaps attributable to a comparatively well developed literary taste on his part, since at that tender age I regarded the adventures of Frank and Joe Hardy, Tom Swift, and Tarzan as the

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<sup>2</sup> I was to come across the remarkable palindrome *Yawn a more Roman way* many years later.

acme of literature. So the idea of acquiring these volumes *en bloc* came to grip my small mind with such a passion that in some way I managed to thwart my parents' intention of doling them out one by one: the result was a veritable orgy of reading, the first I can actually recall. These and other treasures were, alas, mistakenly cast aside long ago. Although I have no desire to reread *While the Clock Ticks*, *The Disappearing Floor*, *The Twisted Claw*, or *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar* (to say nothing of *Tom Swift and his Iron Lung* and *Me Tar, You Zan*), it is impossible not to regret the loss of books bearing such evocative titles.

I also recall reading Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, which enthralled me. One of my parents' friends then presented me with a copy of London's powerful socialist novel *The Iron Heel*, presumably in the belief that it was a further story of Yukon adventure. I can still remember my surprise on opening the maroon covers of the book (sadly, no longer in my possession) and seeing the extraordinary chapter headings: *The Roaring Abysmal Beast*, *The People of the Abyss*, etc. It seemed, at first glance, to be some kind of horror story (which in a way it is, but not the kind I was expecting), but I found it quite over my head. Only when I read the book through some years later did I come to understand that "Abysmal Beast" refers to the downtrodden proletariat.

In Rome I had a friend, David Muss, who was, I think, a bit older than me. All I can remember of him is that his parents were often away and in their absence he was looked after by the household cook whom he affectionately, and appropriately, called "Cuoca."

The ignoble role I played in a certain unpleasant incident was to become a family shibboleth. My sister Lynette and I frequently bickered. In the course of some argument I shoved her, unintentionally causing her to fall and strike her nose against the coffee table in our living room. Thereafter her nose bore a small scar, which, fortunately, proved to be nondisfiguring. While mnemonic decay (aided, no doubt, by psychic repression) has obliterated my conscious memory of the event itself, a residue of guilt remains. From such materials, I guess, is the superego fashioned.

It must have been at about this time that I first became acquainted with a phenomenon I came to term *negative sound*. Lying in bed at night, what I identified as the "positive" sounds of the numberless goings-on of the external world (traffic, human voices, etc.) would gradually subside, to be replaced by the hiss in my ears, an aural "zero" in its turn quickly yielding to the "negative" sound of my own pulse. This would grow in intensity until I became sufficiently alarmed to break the spell by uttering a word, pinching myself, throwing off the covers, or the like. There was also an analogous visual phenomenon. I had found that, just before I fell asleep, visual images, particularly of

human faces, would become strangely fluid. In my mind's eye a face would on occasion float, unbidden, into view, its features, perfectly innocuous at first, then commencing to undergo a slow but sinister transformation. The process would gradually accelerate, and with mounting alarm I would grasp that it could only terminate in a visage of such inconceivable horror. At that point a nervous spasm would mercifully intervene, breaking the grip of my overheated visual imagination and finally enabling me to fall into an uneasy sleep. Later I learned that these disturbing images have been studied by psychologists under the name of "hypnagogic hallucinations."

It may also have been in Rome that my parents attempted to explain to me the rudiments of the human reproductive process. All I have retained of their account is that the man somehow "shoots a seed" into the woman, an action which mysteriously results in the woman giving birth to a baby. Unhappily, I visualized this "seed" as an avocado pit, leading me to believe that the process of insemination must be something of an ordeal.