



**KAFKA *in***  
**BRONTËLAND**  
and other stories

**TAMAR YELLIN**

“Yellin is a consummate stylist.  
Her sentences are to die for.”

JEFF VANDERMEER

Toby

# Uncle Oswald

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hy do the family always ask about Uncle Oswald? For years and years I have had nothing to do with him. They should understand that by now; yet they always ask: "And do you ever see anything of Uncle Oswald?" No, I reply, I never see him now. They shake their heads. "It's a shame," they say. "And he's your mother's only living relative. You should see him. Why don't you see him any more?" Then I am obliged to repeat the story.

I don't like telling it. It makes me uncomfortable. Not that I feel guilty: it was all his fault. But it doesn't show me up in a good light, all the same. I can't help reading in their faces, as I talk, a certain tight-lipped disapproval. I can tell they're not convinced by my protestations of innocence, least of all by my assurances that I have no wish to see Uncle Oswald in any case, that I am happier to have him out of my life.

They cluck and shake their heads without understanding. "Still," they murmur, "you ought to get in touch. He must be—how old now? Whatever, he isn't getting any younger." I don't need reminding, and as I drive back up north I am forced to utter aloud the retorts

I can't make to their faces. After all, they're related to him too, in a fashion. Why the hell don't they get in touch?



I am blessed with a large family—that is, on my father's side. My father was a remarkable man: a visionary, scientist, inventor. His relatives are all more or less remarkable. I love visiting them. They open doors in the mind, stimulate the intellect, and amaze the imagination with their ideas. It's a shame we live at opposite ends of the country.

I will never understand what my father saw in my mother, whose only remarkable act was to marry him. I am not saying she did not have a strong personality. She most certainly did. But she was in no way original, unusual or strange. In fact she was quite dull compared to him.

I think my father's family feel the same, though they would be far too polite to say so. They were as fond of her as I was, and miss her likewise; but I can tell, from certain hints they drop, from certain bitter comments, that they don't think she was quite good enough for him. He was a brilliant man who never fulfilled his potential: for this they blame her, as I suppose I do too.

Physically they were also very different: my father the classic intellectual, tall, thin and stooped, with bald patch and steel-rimmed spectacles; my mother the sensualist, short, broad, sporting the thickest calves I have ever seen and a truly Amazonian head of hair. As for myself, the product of this unlikely union, I am delighted to say I have inherited my father's characteristics in the main, with one notable exception: my hair is long, wild and voluminous, and, like my mother's, a flaming banshee red.



I traced my family tree once: through my father's side, of course. Londoners, back to the eighteenth century. Scholars, bibliophiles. One was a court physician. I know everything there is to be known about my father's ancestors, but about my mother's I know hardly anything at all.

They came from Poland: I've gleaned that much. Polish peasants or tinkers. Once—I think it was the day my grandmother died—we sat in Uncle Oswald's kitchen and found her birthplace on the map. I can still see his podgy finger pointing, but I can't for the life of me remember the name of the shtetl.

Anyway, there must have been a family quarrel, because they never communicated with their Polish relatives. Then, after the war, it was too late. My grandparents were the only survivors of two large families. Ada and Oswald were the sole representatives of their generation. It must have been a lonely feeling, like being washed up on an island after a huge shipwreck; and the island was England, of course. I have been thinking about that a lot recently. I imagine my mother and uncle washed up on the shores of England, two children clinging together. Everyone acknowledges that they were unusually close.



I have a photograph, it must have been taken during the war. They are both in uniform, smiling, their cheeks pressed together. It's a nice picture, a studio portrait. They look young and attractive. That is not how I remember them.

The way I remember it, they were both enormous, but Uncle Oswald was even more enormous than my mother. He filled rooms. I mean not just actually but metaphysically: he had a personality which filled rooms.

Bumptious, lumbering, gluttonous, vain, ugly man! How I used to shrink into corners when he (literally) darkened the door; how I used to dread his falsely velvet voice—his velour voice—demanding a kiss and a hug. He smelt of tobacco and whiskey and sawdust from the factory where he was boss, and when he pressed me to his gigantic belly I felt revulsion running in every vein. It was a lying embrace on both sides, mine and his: a manifestation of true family feeling.

I did not hate Uncle Oswald then. I merely disliked him. I disliked his waistcoat with the pretentious watchguard, his Jaguar with the walnut panelling. I disliked his fat laugh and his way of smoking a cigar, the tip of his tongue protruding. I recoiled in the simple

way of children, the way they recoil from a spider or a slug, but all my suspicions were confirmed the day my father murmured in my ear, "That's a pompous blighter, that one."

From then on my father and I entered a secret, unspoken alliance, an alliance of the Franks against the Finkels; intellect against trade; refinement against vulgarity. We were Franks. He was a Finkel. She? She would have liked to be a Frank, but she couldn't help it. Her ancestry was too powerful. She was Finkel through and through.



My uncle was jealous of my father. I state it baldly now: I did not know it at the time. As children, subliminally, we know things which only come home to us in adulthood with a sudden shock of recognition. It's part of growing up. I must have been twenty-odd when I first realised he was jealous. A weird shudder passed over me, like a snake shedding its skin.

Naturally, there was no contest. My parents were a devoted couple. Infatuated, the family say. That is their explanation for the strange alliance: "He was infatuated with her."

But Uncle Oswald never showed a proper respect for my father. He thought he was a weakling, a puny intellectual. This although my father ran a reasonably successful business. He never missed an opportunity to take him down a bit.

I remember, for example, the time my father demonstrated the Shoematic. It was his latest and best invention. Like all good inventions, it had an almost comic simplicity. A set of adjustable brushes surrounded a small platform. On the platform was a rotating belt. The shoe—still attached to one's foot—was placed on the belt, and merely by moving it back and forth, was effectively polished, buffed and cleaned.

My father, with the intent and quiet pride of the inventor, showed Uncle Oswald the mechanism: how the movement of the belt operated a series of rollers, which caused the brushes to rotate; how the transference of energy from one piece of the mechanism to the next reduced the effort required on the part of the user. He mentioned

how it saved him having to strain his bad back and arthritic shoulder, how three pairs of shoes could be cleaned in the time it normally took to polish one. Closing it up, he displayed again the simple beauty of the casing, cunningly assembled from an old brass coal-box.

"So what did he do," the family ask, with that air of scepticism which always seems to colour our conversations about Uncle Oswald, "what did he say that was so terrible?"

He didn't say anything. He laughed. He laughed as though the Shoematic were the most amusing thing he had ever seen.

"And that's so terrible?" they shrug, for they are all inventors, accustomed to ridicule, and all as tough as old boots. But I remember the look of mortification in my father's eyes, and I knew I hated Uncle Oswald then.



There is a type of family quarrel, it is called the *brogez*. It is the kind of quarrel which occurs only in families or between close friends: people who know each other well enough to behave without any semblance of maturity. The kind of quarrel which took place between Saul and David or Sleeping Beauty's mother and the wicked fairy (who was really her unmarried sister). The term is both nominal and adjectival: Saul was *brogez* with David, and threw a spear at him, and tried to kill him; the queen and the fairy had a *brogez*, and Beauty pricked her finger and slept for a hundred years.

In general, the origins of the *brogez* must be as trivial as possible: a word ill-chosen or an invitation overlooked. The psychological origins, of course, are always Freudian in their complexity, and in both respects the *brogez* between my mother and her brother fulfilled all the criteria.

My mother invited Uncle Oswald to our Passover meal; Uncle Oswald declined, and went to a dinner at his club. Both the fact of his refusal and the manner of it stung her. He was offhand and contemptuous. To her it was not only a dismissal of his heritage but also a snub to my father, who would lead the service.

The unspoken message from Oswald to Ada was: I won't play second fiddle, and I'll jettison our past, too.

## *Uncle Oswald*

The unspoken reply from Ada to Oswald was: If I'm asked to choose, my loyalties lie with my husband and not with you.

They did not speak to each other for a long time.

Then my father died. One month later, after a rancorous absence of three years, Uncle Oswald re-entered our lives.

I was sitting quietly in my bedroom, reading Asimov. There was a knock at the door. My mother appeared, looking like a fat Bette Davis, with red rims to her eyes. She threw me a half-mournful, half-admonishing look, and in came Uncle Oswald, bigger than ever, truly gargantuan in fact; the slicked-back hair the same, the waistcoat and watchguard the same. The floorboards creaked as he entered. No-one could have looked more incongruous in my delicate bedroom with its lace curtains, its glass menagerie. He held out his arms and said in his velour voice, "Come and give your uncle a hug."

I did it for her. I hugged him.



After that Uncle Oswald came round for dinner every Friday, fitting us into the schedule which accommodated his ex-wife on Tuesdays and his ex-girlfriend on Thursdays, the woman he lived with on weekends and Monday nights at his club. This left Wednesday as the only night of the week when he had to cook for himself: on Wednesdays he ate fish and chips at the office.

Uncle Oswald had done well for himself since we were last in touch. He now had a three-year-old Jaguar with electric windows and a Rolex which could dive up to a depth of twenty metres. His jerry-built villa was filled with bad china and reproduction antiques. He also possessed the first home computer I ever saw. By moving a joystick and pressing a button one could send a white dot bouncing back and forth over a line on the television screen, and they called it tennis.

Soon after the reconciliation he took us out to dinner at a steakhouse where he addressed the waiter as George and George responded with a barely perceptible shudder. He ordered soup, sirloin and profiteroles, and a bottle of moderately-priced wine which he tasted with all the pretension of a fake connoisseur.



He would never marry again, he said. Marriage was a business contract, and he had no desire to go into partnership. Why put himself under obligations when he already had all the benefits? My mother remarked quietly that there was such a thing as emotional commitment. Uncle Oswald scoffed. He didn't know about emotions: he wasn't sure what they were. But altogether too much fuss was made about them, especially by women.

It was how they gained a stranglehold, he said.

My mother looked pale and tearful, and I could tell she was offended on behalf of her thirty-year marriage, which had been stable and loving and had ended so recently in bereavement; but Uncle Oswald stuffed his mouth with sirloin, he was impervious, he began to talk about my father. Why had he gone into gadgets? he wondered. He'd never met a man less suited.

My mother asked what Uncle Oswald meant.

"Well, let's face it," he replied, with the geniality of one who could afford to be generous to his rival now that he was dead, "he tried his best. But he was five-thumbed, bless him."

I thought of the hundred little improvements my father had made in our house, the mended locks and switches, the carved picture-frames, the gleaming Shoematic which still graced our porch. I could not believe my mother would let this slander pass. But she said nothing. She just wiped away a tear and dug into her surf-and-turf, and as she consumed it I was Hamlet, betrayed by the mother with the uncle: the lone and vengeful champion of my father's memory.



Each Friday night, after the food and wine, they would retire to the lounge and watch television while I sat in my room, brooding. For my mother's sake, I would be polite during dinner. I did not make cutting remarks when Uncle Oswald showed off his latest gewgaws—calculators, pagers, musical gizmos, always, of course, the most expensive, top-of-the-range, only-the-best-will-do—but nor did I gratify him by paying them much attention. Up in my room I soliloquised and sulked, while they, heavy with good things, talked about old times, the stock market, the power of the unions. They had resumed a close-

ness whose roots were laid long before I was born, and which I had no hope of severing.

On Sunday afternoons I tagged along with my mother to his tacky villa, and was fed thin omelettes by Doreen, a tired, kind-looking woman whom he had seduced at the age of twenty and who now sat waiting for the marriage he had always promised without ever setting a date. Doreen ushered me to the bedroom, where sitting on the unmade bed with its sweaty nylon sheets, she showed me the bracelets he had given her, the thick gold chains, the rings. She described the choker she was having altered at the shop, set with amethysts and opals. "Ooh, it's a magnificent piece," she breathed, her breath smelling of hunger and acetone, "a really splendid piece." I watched her and wondered what she saw in him, what they all saw in him. Whether it was his natural ebullience; his aphrodisiac bulk, his sheer self-love, they were caught in a ritual of complicity no less than the drones which service the fat queen bee.

As for Uncle Oswald, he was under no illusions as to my feelings for him. One evening he appeared at my bedroom door and said, "I used to come here to see you and your mother; now I only come to see your mother." I tested the blade of these words; they didn't hurt me. Later I overheard them talking in the lounge. "It's a difficult age," my mother argued. "She's her father's daughter," Uncle Oswald disagreed. He couldn't have paid me a greater compliment; and we both knew what it meant. In the war for my mother's affections it would be a fight to the death.



The family are shocked by my colourful language; they don't believe me. How can I explain that that is literally what it was, that it was like murder, that nothing can atone for what happened?

"So they had a tiff, a silly argument. What about? He wouldn't give her a lift to the hospital? Is that a reason for a full-scale *brogez*?"

But he already knew she was dying.

"All the same, you should have phoned him. She would have wanted you to phone him."

But she didn't. I asked her. She said, "I never think of him."  
"She didn't mean it. You should have phoned."

Yes. I should have phoned. But I didn't, and she died unrec-  
onciled. He never came to the funeral. That was the last I saw of  
Uncle Oswald.



Years have passed. I've grown up. I'm my own person. I run my own  
business. People say I have a head for business. They also tell me to  
stay away from hammers and circular saws. Is that the Finkel side  
of me or the Frank? Am I a Frank or a Finkel? Sometimes I think I  
should change my name to Frinkel.

I don't like it when I read about genetic blueprints. About how  
genes are laid down in the foetus, some from the mother, some from  
the father. How are they measured out, how are they chosen? Can  
we be more like one parent than the other? Can't we dispense with  
father or mother? Is there no escape from our heritage, our unwanted  
traits, our betraying banshee hair?



I did as they asked. A dozen years too late, I finally called Uncle  
Oswald.

But he was no longer on the telephone. The tacky villa had  
been sold. At last I managed to contact Doreen, who told me that  
since the business went down they had been living at the Golden  
Acres trailer park.

"Ooh, but it's a magnificent trailer," she enthused, "a really  
splendid trailer."

So I drove out to Golden Acres, where it seemed there were no  
trailers large enough to contain a man of Uncle Oswald's bulk and  
personality, but I found him sitting on the steps of a gleaming white-  
and-silver Elddis named Shangri-La. He had aged: all the robust rolls  
of flesh had sagged, as though they could support their own weight  
no longer, and the contours of his face had fallen.

"Hello, Oswald," I said.

Doreen was standing in the entrance, clutching a dishcloth.

She hadn't changed a bit. "She's come to see you, Oswald. Isn't that nice?"

"I've come to say sorry," I said.

Uncle Oswald lifted his enormous mass from the step where it was planted, slowly, like cargo being raised by cable. I thought of his body then as a gigantic sack in which our ancestors and all our history were held.

Uncle Oswald said, "I don't need your sorry," and went indoors.

That was it, then: I wouldn't see him again. I would have to do without his forgiveness, and now it had been refused I realised how much I wanted it.

I turned to go. A damp dishcloth touched my arm.

"Don't take any notice!" Doreen whispered. She smelt of parma violets, and close up I saw all the lines of waiting etched onto her twenty-year-old face. "He doesn't mean it. That's just him. Come on in and have a cup of tea."



Why do I continue to visit him? Not for the pleasure of his company, that's certain. We cordially loathe each other. Politically we are poles apart. Yet each Friday night, in the flimsy trailer smelling of chip oil and adorned with tassels, I eat Fray Bentos pies and drink flat warm cola, and listen to the tirades of my Uncle Oswald.

The family is pleased, of course. And I am glad to have exonerated myself in their eyes. "How is your Uncle Oswald?" they ask now, and I can answer truthfully, "The same as ever."

For I cannot deny—and it's a source of some disquiet—that while he remains monumentally the same, I have begun to detect more and more similarities in myself to him. It may not be much—a phrase here, a gesture there—but each time it pulls me up short, and then I have to acknowledge: I am present in Uncle Oswald; Uncle Oswald is present in me.

But I wouldn't allow these sentimental considerations to influence me, and while I can honestly say that I no longer hate him, I can't really pretend to have forgiven him either; nor has he forgiven

me. That much is evident from the things we withhold. A few weeks ago I asked, as casually as possible, if he would point out my grandmother's shtetl on the map; he claimed never to have known it. Last Friday he mentioned a certain photograph, of himself and my mother, taken during the war; I denied all knowledge. I doubt if he will ask again. He's stubborn, and until he softens I shall certainly not repeat my request for the name of the shtetl, which will in all probability die with him.