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1

Made in China

All his life Derek Parfit had a missionary zeal. A zeal to solve the philosophical problems that matter and then persuade people that he was right.

Not only were both of Derek's parents missionaries; remarkably, all four of his grandparents were, too. He grew up in a household that had shed its faith but retained its missionary spirit. This spirit ran deep and centred on a fundamental urge: the urge to do good and help others.

...

One family theory is that the paternal side of Derek's ancestry, the Parfits, was descended from French immigrants—perhaps from the influx of Huguenot Protestants fleeing persecution in France in the seventeenth century, but more likely dating to the eleventh century and the Norman Conquest. References to Parfits, and variations of the name (Parfitt, Parfytt, Parfait), can be traced back hundreds of years.

The facts about Derek's family become more certain in the nineteenth century. Joseph Parfit was born in 1870, and raised in Cheshire Street, in Poplar, a deprived area of east London. Joseph's father had been a silk-weaver before becoming a postman, and they lived in a typical weaver's cottage. In 1894, however, after being ordained as a deacon and priest by the Church Mission Society, Joseph set sail for the Middle East, aiming to dedicate his life to preaching the gospel beyond British shores. He lived in various places—Bombay, Baghdad, Jerusalem,

Beirut—and wrote at least half a dozen books, with titles such as *The Wondrous Cities of Petra and Palmyra*, *Among the Druzes of Lebanon and Bashan*, and *The Romance of the Baghdad Railway*. He married his first wife in Baghdad in 1897, but within a year she was dead—passing away from influenza on a sweltering night. The Church Mission Society may have dispatched Norah Stephens to Baghdad with the intention that she become Joseph's second wife. They were married in 1902, and over the next decade Norah bore six children; Norman, the second eldest, arriving in 1904.

For a dozen years, the Parfit family lived in Lebanon, with Joseph serving as the canon at St George's Church in Beirut. That is where Norman spent much of his childhood. During the hot summers, the family would flee the city and retreat to a village in the hills, where Joseph taught English. Joseph and Norman had a problematic relationship, as Norman would with Derek. Norman wet his bed, and his father would beat him.

When they returned from the Middle East, following the outbreak of the Great War, the Parfits settled in Gloucester. Norman became a pacifist after so many of the senior boys at his school went off to fight in the trenches and never returned; he was also disgusted at being taught to stick bayonets into 'German' dummies.

He won a place to Brasenose College, Oxford, where he was a swimming champion and got a degree in physiology with a grade so terrible (fourth class) that it was considered something of an achievement. He then trained as a doctor at King's College Hospital, London. From 1931 to 1933 he worked in the Royal Free Hospital, in north London, which is where he met his future wife, Jessie.

Jessie Browne had a background that matched Norman's for exoticism. In 1896, just shy of the age of forty, her austere father, Dr Arthur Herbert Browne, abandoned a lucrative medical practice in Liverpool to become a missionary, first in Peshawar and then Amritsar, India. 'Whatever the temptations to stay at home,' he said, 'the needs, and the call abroad remain the same. I would prefer to stay at home, but duty calls me away.'¹ Dr Browne had a shock of white hair, uncannily like that of his philosophical grandson many decades later. He began one

enlightened venture in which Christians and Muslims held open discussion. His medical support proved useful during the appalling famine at the turn of the century that devastated, in particular, the Bhils ethnic group. His services were again called upon after the 1905 earthquake in the Kangra Valley in Punjab, which killed around two hundred thousand people. The toughest part, he wrote in a letter home, was identifying and burying the remains.

As fate would have it, Arthur Browne suffered the same tragedy as Joseph Parfit: his first wife died before they could start a family. Like Joseph, he remarried (in 1909), this time to a nurse, Ellen. Jessie was born in 1910. Dr and Mrs Browne had their evangelical work cut out: they were supposed to carry the Christian message to a specific area in the Punjab covering around seven hundred villages and three hundred thousand people. But there were isolated communities of Christians who had arrived from elsewhere and who had settled in the Brownes' district. Ellen thought that 'unless discovered these would in all probability soon lapse back into Heathenism.'² Jessie had a low opinion of her mother and later wrote that 'her interest in the Indians was mainly as heathen patients with bodies to be cured and souls to be brought to the Lord.'³ Although they were quite isolated, Jessie once received a letter addressed simply with her name and 'India'.

Arthur Browne died in August 1913 from a combination of septicaemia and diarrhoea. An obituary described his great heart, 'full of love [. . .] but like all ardent lovers, he was capable of vehement indignation, and the way his nostrils would quiver at some tale of injustice or neglect of duty spoke of an element of the Sons of Thunder in his composition.'⁴ Jessie was only three years old. She and Ellen returned to Britain, but when war broke out and Ellen went into army nursing, Jessie boarded with an uncle and aunt in Kettering, Northamptonshire.

Sent to various religious retreats in her holidays, Jessie became very devout herself. When, after the Great War, she moved back in with her mother, she told her that because the Second Coming was so imminent, she 'didn't see any point in working for exams.'⁵ Nonetheless, she grew up to become a first-rate student and, like Norman, studied medicine (at the time, very rare for a woman)—first, from 1928, at the London

School of Medicine for Women and then at the Royal Free Hospital. Although she hardly knew her father, she was inspired by his career.

As part of her degree, she was sent to work for a spell in the casualty (emergency) unit—where Norman was in charge. He was in fact on the look-out for her, because a few months earlier Jessie had been on a religious camp on the Isle of Wight where she had met Norman's brother Eric, who reported back to Norman that she was 'a good egg'.⁶

Soon they were engaged, but because Norman was a few years older and had already completed his studies in London, he travelled alone to India to study tropical diseases and obtained a diploma from Calcutta University. He was back by 1934, the year in which Jessie won the London University Gold Medal for the top student—a previous winner was Alexander Fleming—gaining distinctions in surgery and pathology. All in all, she had picked up twelve prizes during her studies, the names of which were all recited at the annual prize-giving. The *Daily Mirror* even thought fit to print an article about twenty-three-year-old Jessie, managing to identify the real story: not one student's staggering academic accomplishments, but love. Headlined 'Romance of a Girl Doctor', the article opened with the applause of Jessie's fellow-students, 'ringing in her ears [. . .]. But as she walked back to her seat, a slim figure in cap and gown [. . .] her eyes sought only those of a tall, sun-bronzed young man seated among the audience. They smiled with mutual understanding.'⁷

A proud Dr Norman Parfit had a progressive attitude: 'our marriage will not be allowed to interfere with her career'.⁸ Indeed, Jessie continued her studies, qualifying as a doctor in hygiene at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, while Norman received a diploma in public health from the same institution.

At some stage Norman and Jessie joined the Oxford Group, an evangelical Christian movement founded in the 1920s by an American Lutheran priest, Frank Buchman, who had strong links with China. The movement believed that core human weaknesses, fear and selfishness, could only be overcome by surrendering one's life to God and by conveying His message to others. Although humans were not expected to attain the movement's four absolutes—absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love—they were supposed to

be guided by them. Part of the Group's practice involved individuals discussing their personal lives and decisions, owning up to their sins, and explaining the steps they were taking to alter their behaviour. (It is no coincidence that the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous had been members of the Oxford Group.)

Before Norman and Jessie married, they approached the Church Mission Society about working abroad as missionaries. The Society agreed (in late 1934) to send them to China, but recommended that they should not have children for the first two years away, so that they would have time to settle in and learn the language. This, of course, meant they would have to abstain from sex or practise birth control. They were not Catholic, but Ellen was so outraged by the demand and her daughter's agreement to it that she refused to attend their wedding.

This took place in North Oxford on 29 July 1935. On top of the wedding cake was the Oxford University motto, while the bottom tier had silver chains with maps of China—the country for which, a few months later, the newly married couple set forth. They arrived, via Canada and Japan, in late 1935, carrying in their luggage the top half of the cake (which was finally consumed on their first wedding anniversary). Their base was to be Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan in south-west central China, known in the West for its giant pandas. The couple's initial impressions were contained in a long letter in January 1936: 'We just feel that this is an amazing place [...] and we feel it is a very great privilege to be sent here by God.'⁹

Soon they would take up teaching positions at the West China Union University, run by Christian missionaries; the beautiful campus lay outside the medieval walls. But first they headed for a remote community in Mount Omei, a sacred Buddhist mountain, south-east of Chengdu, in part to immerse themselves in Sichuanese, a dialect of Mandarin. (Jessie picked up the language quickly, but Norman, much to his frustration, could not.)

Norman took the journey to the hills first, to prepare their bungalow, and Jessie followed with several others in mid-June 1936. The journey involved a terrifying episode on a boat trip to the area. The vessel was boarded by five or six bandits who ripped open boxes and bags, stole

money, and took Jessie's watch, fountain pen, torches, mosquito net, and rings. Afterwards, Jessie was able to see the funny side. In an account dispatched back to the Church Mission Society, she described how one bandit had a revolver in one hand, a lady's compact powder case in the other, and some stolen ladies' underwear tucked into his belt.

Somehow this story was passed down to Derek, but in mangled form. He would claim that although the pirates stole Jessie's money, they allowed her to keep either her wedding or her engagement ring. And, as we shall see, he used this as a case study to illustrate the difficulty of interpreting the maxims of the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

In 1937, Jessie and Norman began to teach in the public health department of West China Union University—on topics such as personal hygiene, nutrition, exercise, and how to ensure safe drinking water. They stuck to the no-children-for-two-years agreement, but in 1939 Theodora arrived, and on 11 December 1942 Derek Antony Parfit appeared in the world. 'I was born at the lowest point in human history,' he once said.¹⁰

He would always hate his given name, and envied his sister's classical one. Later in life, his Skype profile name was Theodoricus, because he playfully imagined he had a fictitious Roman ancestor called Theodoricus Perfectus.

Aged around nine months, Derek nearly died. He had become sick and was screaming incessantly. The local doctors were baffled, but Jessie correctly diagnosed intussusception, whereby the bowel folds around itself like a telescope, causing acute abdominal pain. She ordered the doctors to administer a water enema, which immediately resolved the problem.

...

By the time Theodora and Derek appeared in the world, war had already begun to impinge on life in Chengdu. In 1931, the Japanese had invaded and then set up a puppet state in Manchuria (north-east China), and in 1937, the year the Parfits moved to Chengdu, tensions between Japan and China erupted into a full-scale conflict. In the notorious massacres

in Nanjing between December 1937 and January 1938, tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands, of Chinese civilians lost their lives.

That was a thousand miles to the east of Chengdu, but as the fighting continued, refugees began pouring into the city. They brought with them many public health challenges, and Jessie and Norman were kept busy. The cost of living began to soar, contributing to worsening childhood malnourishment. In response, the Parfits were involved in the development of a milk powder made from soya beans. It was cheaper than dairy milk and the soya bean, it was said, was the cow of China. A manufacturing unit was set up on campus, and within the first eighteen months it had distributed forty thousand packets of powder.

Their other dominating public issue was student health. Dormitories were overflowing with students who had fled universities in other cities, including Nanjing. These were conditions in which tuberculosis flourished. In response, the Parfits helped organize a testing and quarantine system.

Chengdu remained beyond the reach of Japanese ground forces, but it was not invulnerable to attack from the air. Now and again, Japanese bombers would fly overhead. Jessie kept a careful count of the raids. Theodora remembers watching her looking up at the sky, wondering whether she was looking for God.

In fact, whilst both Theodora and Derek were absorbing Christian dogma as young children, their parents Jessie and Norman were becoming disillusioned with their faith. They played an active part in the missionary community—Norman became treasurer of the local mission and Jessie busied herself with the newsletter. But they didn't warm to their fellow missionaries, whom they regarded as racist. The American and Canadian missionaries were better resourced and quite grand, and most of them expected the local Chinese to enter houses only through the back door, the front door being reserved for higher-status guests. The Parfits came to believe that their religion had little to offer the ancient and sophisticated culture of China and certainly should not be imposed on the Chinese by outsiders; for a brief period, Norman became a Maoist, ingeniously interpreting this to be consistent with his pacifism. Then there were personal circumstances: they struggled

financially and complained to the Church Mission Society that the rising cost of living made their salaries inadequate. Norman's unhappiness grew: he began to suffer bouts of serious depression.

...

In February 1944, after nine years in China, the decision was made by the Society to evacuate Norman and Jessie, despite the tide of the war against Japan having decisively begun to turn. The Parfits were long overdue home leave. However, January 1944 saw the start of the so-called Baby Blitz—a new Luftwaffe bombing offensive against Britain—and so, rather than return to Blighty immediately, Norman and Jessie sold all their material possessions and took a circuitous route back, heading first to the relative safety of the US, where Eric, Norman's brother, was living.

Jessie was now two months pregnant with an unplanned third child and she was sick throughout their long and gruelling journey. The trip began with a flight south to the city of Kunming on a Liberator bomber, for which Norman and Jessie had to practise parachute jumping, and during which Theodora and Derek sat on the floor under the gun turret by the cockpit. If the plane was attacked, the plan was for the pilots to strap the two children in their laps before parachuting out.

Then there was another flight, to Calcutta. From there it was a 1,200-mile train ride west to Bombay, where there were several thousand ex-pats and refugees waiting around to be repatriated. The Parfits stayed for several days in a ramshackle hotel where one day Jessie 'found Derek lying in his cot absolutely covered with bed bugs'.¹¹ Eventually they were allocated a place on one of the two departing transport ships: non-American passengers were split alphabetically by name between a navy and an army ship, the 'P's being embarked on the latter.

They would spend nine weeks at sea, sailing first to Australia, where they dropped off a thousand Italian prisoners of war, and then across the Pacific through the Panama Canal, with Boston as the final destination. There were only two meals a day, and children were on the breakfast and supper shift, so Theodora and Derek went without food during the day.

Jessie and the few other mothers petitioned an army commander to allow them to give the children soup for lunch, which would otherwise be a supper course, and they offered to do all the serving and washing. The commander steadfastly refused: 'He said that women and children had no business to be travelling in wartime and he was going to do nothing to make it easier for them.'¹² Jessie resorted to smuggling items out of breakfast.

The strain on Jessie was almost too much for her to bear. She, Theodora, and Derek were in a cabin with nine others, while Norman was 'in bed most of the time on the men's side of the ship',¹³ suffering from sea-sickness. There was a daily drill, when she and the children had to trail up to the top deck with their life-jackets. An exhausted Jessie washed Derek's nappies in cold sea-water. The children seemed to be blissfully unaware of their parents' mood. Theodora recalls loving the boat trip. Derek took his first tentative steps at the Panama Canal.

. . .

The Parfits wasted no time in Boston before continuing their trip to New York. They lived for two or three months in a flat on Claremont Avenue belonging to a Columbia University professor, and then moved into a cheap but 'dreary'¹⁴ apartment in Washington Heights, in northwest Manhattan, a Jewish immigrant area 'where the shops always seemed to be shut for some Jewish holiday or other'.¹⁵ Shortly afterwards, in October, Jessie booked into the cheapest hospital she could find to give birth to her third child, Joanna. Somehow, Jessie managed to combine looking after a newborn with studying behaviour problems among children, at Columbia. She took advantage of a diaper service, and 'a coloured girl'¹⁶ came weekly to help clean. Norman couldn't earn money because his degree was not recognized in the US, but he visited various hospitals to upgrade his medical knowledge. He was on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, DC on 12 April 1945 when he heard the distressing news of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death.

After the deprivations of China, the United States was a revelation, a land of 'plenty and luxury'¹⁷, with crowded shops full of goods. The

Parfits were particularly captivated by the automats—fast-food vending machines. They couldn't believe that soap was only seven cents a tablet. Norman fell in love with the 'Chock-full-o-nuts' lunch counters that offered a nutted-cheese sandwich—cream cheese and nuts on raisin bread. They enjoyed several trips with Theodora and Derek to Central Park Zoo.

The aim was to get back to the UK, but a wartime passage across the Atlantic was impossible. Theodora and Derek were sent to the Horace Mann Nursery School. In one letter, Jessie described Derek as a curly-headed blond and a mischievous little rascal. He had been a very late talker, and Norman worried they might have to put him in a school for children with learning difficulties. But then he became chatty. His favourite word was 'No', and once when a trip to a park was suggested he delivered his longest utterance to date: 'No ball, no walk, no bus, no tram.'¹⁸

Baby Joanna's arrival added an additional bureaucratic hurdle to the family's UK plans. Born on US soil, she was a US citizen, and there was paperwork to be completed before she was permitted to travel back on a British passport. But with the war over, the Parfits bought tickets on the ocean liner the *Queen Mary*. This gargantuan vessel had been converted into a troopship during the war and the Parfits were passengers on its first peacetime (so blackout-free) sailing. They docked in June 1945 at Greenock on the Scottish east coast and took an overnight train journey to London King's Cross.

The family was finally home. For a short period after that, Derek developed a stammer. His parents believed it was because he was so over-excited.

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