THE 1930 OLYMPICS

H. L. Mountzoures

Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction

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Introduction

“The 1930 Olympics” by H. L. Mountzoures

Deception, self-deception, and the fallibility of memory are central issues in psychotherapy. Freud first accepted and then rejected the literal truth of patients’ childhood memories, concluding that these accounts were fantasies that the patients believed to have actually happened. “The 1930 Olympics” takes the issue of remembering-what-never-happened even further. It presents a patient who, as a form of resistance, consciously lies to —and deceives-his therapist.

The 1930 Olympics

H. L. Mountzoures

"What else?" Dr. Larsen said. I could not see him. There was a tall window behind him. His shadow fell forward on my left, long and thin, sliding across the thick olive-green carpeting. A huge potted plant grew at my feet, and another beyond that spread like a web.

"I can't remember," I said.

"Try."

I felt like looking at his long, narrow face. At thirty dollars an hour, he should have *sounded* interested. There was a silence that cost me about half a dollar. I had been going to him for a year, and he wasn't helping me. No one was. But that was my fault. I knew that. I didn't want any help. Perhaps.

"Well," I said. "Somehow, my father and I were on this train to Providence. I don't know why Providence, or why my father. I've never been there myself, except on the way to Boston . . . Wait. Once, I did go *through* Providence with him. When I still lived home, in New Haven. It was ten years ago. I remember, because my mother died shortly after. I drove his car. There were three of us—he brought along one of his friends to talk with. I don't remember who now. The windows were closed—it was winter—and the two

of them smoked a lot. I was a senior in college, on the swimming team, and I remember the cigar smoke bothered me, because I didn't smoke then and I was in good shape."

"Did you talk with your father on the train in the dream?"

"In fact, I was in perfect shape. I still felt that life was sort of meaningful, you know? We drove through on Route 1. The purpose of the trip was an interview for a Midwestern medical school—the interviewer was staying at a big Boston hotel. My father was confident I would get accepted, and he was prepared to do anything to see me through—take out a second mortgage, borrow money, anything. He probably only had a couple thousand dollars in the bank, if that. I let him down."

"Did you?"

"Well, I never wanted to be a doctor. But try to tell your father that when he came from the old country and worked hard all his life, and you'd said when you were eight or ten that you would be a doctor someday. I hated him for it then. Driving to Boston, I said to him in my mind, 'You lousy bastard, I don't want to be your lousy doctor or your lousy son.' But, like I told you before, I think it had something to do with the fact that my mother was so sick at the time."

I stopped. I almost felt like telling Dr. Larsen the truth. That my father was dead, too. That I had come to this office a year before because my father

had just died and my only feeling was a slight relief. Then I had begun to find it frightening to get up, to go to work. Dr. Larsen knew the last part.

I said, "I don't want to talk about it. Not now."

"Go ahead. Try to talk about it." His voice was gentle, prodding.

I couldn't. I said, "The interview went badly. I remember the man who interviewed me was thin and pale, with black hair growing out of his nostrils. He asked me a question, and I went blank and said so. I asked him if he would be patient with me. I told him I always got rattled during interviews. His face set, and I understood. A week later, at college, I got a form letter of refusal. Right away, I withdrew my applications from all the other medical schools. It was the first real decision I ever made in my life. I was scared, but I felt happy, too. Relieved. I don't think my father ever looked at me the same way again. I think he felt I was a failure. I think he still does."

"Do *you* think you are?"

I did not answer. There was a dollar pause.

"About the train, now. The train ride."

You're all the same, I thought. With your trains and pencils and monuments and screwdrivers. "The train wasn't important," I said. "It was just a way of getting there and happened in a flash. When we got off, we weren't in Providence. We were in the country. It was beautiful, in a desolate

way. There were streaks of thin yellow clouds, with reddish tints. I think the sun was setting. We were near a cove that ran out to sea. On the other side of the cove a large patch of dry fronds moved in the light. The sand was soft and white. We stood on the shore together, my father and I, looking at the water. It was a beautiful blue, and right at the shore, near razor grass and beach roses, the water was frothy, white. I looked up, and far away there was a huge city—industrial, with smokestacks, yellow smoke coming out of them, and brick buildings, dirty. Something like when you pass through the Bronx on the way to Manhattan. You know?"

"Mmm. That's interesting. How did you feel about your father right at that moment, when you were standing beside the water together looking at the city?"

"I don't remember. I didn't feel any way toward him. Nothing aggressive, I mean. We were just *there,* that's all. Together."

"Beside the water."

"Yes. And then my father said, 'Aren't you going swimming?' *'SwimmingT* I said. 'But it's winter.' He said, 'I would.' The next thing, we're in a crude wooden bathhouse. I look at my father. He has on one of those old-fashioned tank suits, black. I think he even had a mustache. He looked like someone out of one of those old Victorian photographs. I only remember the top half of the suit. I was surprised at his shoulders, at his good build. He was

slim and strong."

"Why only the top half?"

"How should I know?"

"How was he standing?"

"It was like a closeup in the movies, and you could only see him from the waist up."

"Could you see yourself, or feel your own whole body then?"

"I don't remember."

"You mustn't hold back anything. If there are things you remember and don't tell me, then you're wasting both your time and mine."

He has to be hard, I thought. "Honestly, Doctor, I don't recall."

"Go on, then."

"I went to a wooden beach locker and opened it, and there was nothing in it, no bathing suit. I looked at my father, and he shook his head. He pointed above him, and across a beam his name was carved, with a date: Alberto Cottelli 1930. Then, there was a bathhouse attendant, some kind of a trainer, standing beside me in black pants, a white shirt, with a black bow tie. He said, 'They don't make them like that anymore. He was a great athlete. I trained him for the 1930 Olympics' . . . Doctor, there weren't any Olympics in 1930,

were there? Were there?"

"Let me see. '36, Berlin . . . No."

"I didn't think so. I think that's the year my father came to America. His name and that date were carved in the pine beam. . . . Then my father and I were at the beach again."

"What were you wearing now?"

"I don't remember. I guess clothes weren't part of it. We were on the same piece of shore, looking at the same scene. The water was moving, rippling. And then I heard a voice. Mournful. It was calling my name: 'Jo—seph . . . Jo—ey . . .' Like music. Pleading. It was my mother's voice. I turned around. There was no one there. And then I saw, on the sand, half hidden under a thick tuft of grassy bank, a small, dark-green plastic bag. It was about a foot square, shiny, full, puffed up, gathered, tied tight at the top. 'Oh, no!" I said. My father nodded slowly, wiping his eyes."

There was a long silence. For the first time, I didn't think how much it was costing, this silence.

I could hear the doctor breathing. "A bag?" he said. I thought there was a smile in his voice.

I said, "But Doctor, don't you see? It was her—the voice came from *that.* And my father stood there crying."

"What else?"

"Nothing. Not there, anyway. Next thing, we're home—in the old house in New Haven. While my father and I were out, someone ransacked the whole place. Christ, everything piled up in heaps in the center of the rooms—mattresses, mirrors, pictures, tables. And in my study all my books thrown down from the shelves, the papers from my files scattered all over the room. Someone had broken in and turned the place upside down. My father said, 'We must get to the bottom of this.' And that's all. There wasn't any more."

The doctor ruffled his pad. He said, "Well, I think we have some progress. We've run over the hour now. I've taken some notes, and we'll proceed from here next week. We'll try to go into this dream in detail then, and you can help me . . .Tell me. Are you on speaking terms with your father yet?"

"In fact," I said, "I'm glad you asked. He was in the city last week, and I took him to dinner. We spoke a few sentences. Without having a fight. Neither of us mentioned my mother." I got up and prepared to leave. "There's something I want to tell you, Doctor. I think I'm beginning to like him. It probably sounds stupid, but there it is." Another lie, but I thought it would give him a feeling of a breakthrough, a benevolent feeling of helping me, one of his patients.

"Good," he said. "That's very good." He stood up quickly. As usual he had

been leaning back in a black leather swivel chair, and it sprang forward like a dog. He said, “Of course, next week you may come in all confused and hostile toward him again, but don’t let that worry you. As I’ve been trying to tell you, nothing is black and white. There are awful tremors in all our relationships. Try to see your father again this week. Force yourself to converse with him, no matter how hard it is. Be pleasant with him. Try not to argue. Then we’ll see what next week brings.”

We stood awkwardly for a moment. I glanced at his pale-blue, almost colorless eyes, and I felt embarrassed. The afternoon light was soft, yellow. What fools we all are, I thought. I said, “Same time, same station.”

He smiled.

I thanked him and walked out of his office, then through the reception room, where there was a woman waiting whom I had not seen before. She was about fifty, wearing a lot of makeup. She sat with a magazine in her lap, pulling hard on a cigarette. I went out and got into the elevator.

On the sidewalk, I turned right. Ahead of me I saw the back of a man, full length, in a cheap, baggy, silver-gray suit—a short, heavy man, walking slowly, pleasantly, as though he were taking the air and didn’t have a care in the world. His hair was salt-and-pepper, blowing softly. One of his hands swung as he walked, and it was thick and slightly gnarled. From the back, he looked and walked like my father.

My impulse was to catch up with this stranger, to tell him what I had just told the doctor in his muffled office full of green plants.

People hurried past, and the man disappeared around the corner.

I felt like crying for the first time in ten years. I walked to the building I had just come out of and stood flat against it in the shade and closed my eyes.