Tom Frayn did pretty well with the hand he was dealt. As a child, he shared four rooms in London with his parents, four congenitally deaf siblings, and two other couples. Hard-working, quick-witted, and confident, Tom left school at 14, found a job as a roofing salesman, married, supported two collapsing families as well as his own wife and children, coped with his physical disabilities and a tragedy that descended in midlife, and never complained. To be sure, he had some luck: He was too young to serve in World War I and too old for World War II. And he never owned a house or a car, leaving behind an estate of just three watches, one signet ring, some sweets, and two ink-and-wash prints. Nonetheless, Tom was able to move to the suburbs, wear a homburg hat, use words like “rodomontade,” and dance the night away.

In “My Father’s Fortune,” Michael Frayn, the novelist and Tony Award-winning playwright, pays homage to his dad. Although he knows that there’s a gap between memories and realities, he tries as well to recapture his own formative experiences. Even if his story of a life is a story and not a life — even if he has a subtext that’s hidden in plain sight — “My Father’s Fortune” is beautifully rendered and seriously funny.

To a 7-year-old, Frayn recalls, World War II was wonderful. A fire captain on his street, his dad donned a helmet for protection against shrapnel, searched intently for incendiaries hidden on roofs and sheds, and posted assignments for fellow citizens on a telegraph pole. To protect his family, Tom hired two Irishmen to build in his garden an underground air raid shelter, the only one in the neighborhood. When the warning sounded, Frayn writes, he and his sister trekked down to their “country retreat” in their dressing gowns and made themselves “snug in a little world of candlelight and emergency snacks.”

When it rained, the Frayns discovered that the shelter filled with water. With the chances of dying there, of “exposure, drowning, or some waterborne disease,” much greater than the possibility of extinction from a direct hit on the house, Tom repurposed his War Room. He bought four ducks and a drake, allowed them to roam around the garden during the day, eating kitchen scraps, and kept them safe at night in what became “an armored duck pond.” Their large blue-green eggs, “one of my father’s successes in life,” Frayn claims, fed the family for the remainder of the war.

Despite his eccentricities, Tom Frayn was a rather ordinary man who lived a rather ordinary life. Nor, apparently, did he do all that much to distinguish himself as a father. He was loathe, for example, to pay for his son to go to Cambridge, deeming the benefits of college far from obvious. Tom wasn’t “entirely mollified,” moreover, by Michael’s explanation that he hadn’t answered phone calls requesting help in moving his stuff into a furnished flat because he was driving his wife to the hospital, where she gave birth to Tom’s granddaughter.

“He was a rotten father,” Michael’s sister insists, and Michael professes to be so surprised that he doesn’t ask for reasons, and even now doesn’t understand the deficiencies “she retrospectively found in him.” Perhaps, he speculates, Jill is simply lashing out, irrationally, at her father, the asbestos salesman, for possibly giving her mesothelioma, an incurable cancer of the lining of the lung.

Does Michael protest too much? Does he realize that, with a few exceptions, the paternal gifts he appreciates most were bestowed without magnanimous forethought? By driving his son toward “hard balls and hard mathematics,” which he loathed, Michael suggests, Tom started a chain reaction that led the boy to “soft landscapes of language, of grammar and metaphor, of assonance and dissonance.” By disingenuously pleading poverty, he induced Cambridge University to provide Michael with a far more generous financial aid package. By passing along the right genes, he gets credit for the winning smile Michael often finds on his own face. By dying, he saved Michael from having to care for him in old age.

Why, then, has Michael chosen to “impiously uncover” his father’s nakedness and then emulate the pious Aeneas, bring him “out of the ashes of the past,” and shower praise upon him? Does he seek forgiveness for failing to reply
when Tom, in the hospital “on a hiding to nothing” (his phrase for a hopeless situation), broke through his emotional reserve to acknowledge that Michael’s visits “seemed the mainstay of my existence”? Is he, like Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, the main characters of his play “Copenhagen,” circling the nucleus of his emotions and wondering whether to give voice to ambivalence and even hostility, along with love?

Tom Frayn was responsible for “my very existence,” Michael concludes. “He loved me, saw to it that I was fed and clothed and educated, and left me reasonably free to get on with things in my own way. What more can anyone want from a father?”

A lot more, many of us, including Michael himself, might answer.

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