

CHAPTER TWO

A SWARTHY BABY

LUTHERAN COURT is an oblong strip of land about five acres in extent that runs east-west between the two main thoroughfares in New Amsterdam – Main Street (officially High Street) and the Strand, which is the chief business street. The church and the manse are situated at the western end. At the extreme eastern end, that is on Main Street, stood – and, I believe, still stands – a two-storied cottage, the property of the Lutheran Church. It was in this cottage that my parents first lived when they got married, and it was here that I was born at 2 a.m. on the sixteenth of December, 1909.

For my father, it was an occasion of momentous disappointment. I turned out a swarthy baby!

Himself fair-complexioned with hair of European texture, as were his brothers and sisters (save Anna, the youngest), and his wife also fair-complexioned and European in appearance, he had, naturally, assumed that the chances were heavy in favour of a fair-complexioned baby. (Widely read in his teens and as a young man, had he, I wonder, heard of Mendelism?). However, there it was. His first-born – a swarthy boy!

Always a confirmed negrophobe, he must have felt it deeply that December morning. He has my empathy. It requires the minimum of effort for me to put myself in his place. In a community like that, at that time, he would have had to be superhuman not to be disappointed. A bleak morning and a sunny, dry afternoon: such is the analogy of contrast that could be applied to a swarthy and a fair complexion in New Amsterdam in the year 1909.

There was one important consolation for him, though. I stress important. My hair was dead straight. No sign of any negroid kinks.

Could they have foreseen what my attitude towards orthodox religion was to be in my twenties, my parents might have hesitated before choosing for me the names Edgar Austin. My father and mother were members of All Saints Church, the parish church, and the Rector, an Englishman, evidently did not mind my swarthinness. He it was, in fact, on one of his visits to the home, who insisted that I should be named after him. And it was he, the Reverend Mr. Edgar Josa,¹ who baptized me. I have always

thought it ironical, in view of my rejection of conventional Christianity and adoption of Yoga and Oriental Occultism, that I should have been named after a Church of England priest and (obliquely) a bishop.

My earliest memory goes back to when I was only a year old. My parents were astounded that I could have remembered it, but in my teens I told them of how I recalled yelling in a frenzy of fright in the big double bed in the room on the Main Street side of the cottage whenever a certain toy was put into operation beside me. It was a German toy and consisted of a cart and a donkey. When wound up and put down, the donkey pranced wildly, pulling the cart after it. It was this prancing that terrified me. My mother had to agree that this actually happened. It was no fantasy of mine.

Another very clear and vivid memory – though for obvious reasons I have never asked them to confirm it – is of my nurse, a shapely negro girl, seated on a large travelling trunk in the corridor outside the big bedroom, with me in her lap, casually fumbling out a full breast and letting me fondle it. I'm sure this happened more than once, and I'm equally sure that on one occasion my father passed us, on his way from the bedroom to the stairway, but pretended not to notice. (The picture of this incident, in particular, is too clear in my mind to have been something just imagined up in later years.) It must have been my earliest erotic experience which probably explains why I remember it so distinctly.

Yet equally as vivid is the picture of myself being held in the arms of this or another nurse at the pantry window on the southern side of the cottage. From this window we could look straight into the open doorway – the northeastern entrance – of All Saints Church, not more than a hundred yards distant in Church Street. I can see at this moment the pendant cluster of electric lights glittering over the pews, and recall the feeling of anxiety I had because of the knowledge that both my father and mother were at Evensong and I was alone with the nurse at home. I kept asking her when they would come home, and she kept assuring me: "As soon as church over."

Then there was the blackened patch on one of the bedroom doors caused by some clothes hanging on pegs catching fire one evening. My father was in time to put out the blaze before it could spread and take hold. I have no memory of the actual incident but was told about it after it had occurred. I must have been very curious on seeing the paint-scorched door and I probably asked questions. My Great-aunt Mary, my maternal grandmother's sister, it appears, had been spending time with us, and it was her clothes that had caught fire. There had been some carelessness involving a flat iron in a coal-pot (a receptacle for holding glowing coal).

My sister was born in February, 1911, but the event did not register on me. I can remember her only as a toddler. She was fair-complexioned.

Meantime, there was a change of residence. My father was transferred

to Georgetown, and we lived in another two-storied place in a street called Robb Street. The cottage was owned by a Mr. Lopes, a Portuguese, and it seems that here I entered a destructive phase. I distinctly remember an occasion when I took up some glass object – a tumbler or a mug – from a dinner-wagon and hurled it through the kitchen door, chortling in delight at the tinkling crash it made as it disintegrated on the ground. My mother has related to friends what a menace I was to the glassware in the house.

Just one other memory I have of this Georgetown cottage.

It was of a large frog hopping off in the backyard under the tall breadfruit tree and the cook hurrying out with a jar of salt. She kept sprinkling salt on its back to the accompaniment of loud shrieks of laughter until eventually my mother came downstairs to find out what the hullabaloo was about.

They say infants are psychic. Perhaps, without being aware of it, I saw many a robust ghost in this cottage, for I heard that it was haunted. My mother was nervous to live in it, but she had to admit that she never saw anything spectral while we were there. However, it seems that there must have been something odd about the place, because at the very end, when we were leaving, a manifestation occurred. My father, an arch-sceptic, was alone downstairs in the drawing-room awaiting the arrival of the men who were going to take away the furniture, covered and stacked together upstairs, when he heard a terrific thumping and crashing in one of the bedrooms. He hurried upstairs, expecting to see that some washstand, perhaps, with its earthenware mug, washbasin and soap-dishes, had collapsed, or perhaps that some animal had found its way upstairs and had gone berserk. But the instant he got upstairs the noise ceased – and when he looked round, everything was precisely as he had left it a short while before, intact and untouched. Puzzled, he returned downstairs – and almost at once the pandemonium started again.

In spite of this, however, he continued to be an arch-sceptic. He always pooh-poohed supernatural phenomena.

I cannot say definitely, but I have an idea we went back to the cottage in Lutheran Court. What I know for certain is that there were quarrels between my parents – quarrels that generally ended by my mother bursting into tears. This spectacle always moved me deeply. It created in me a feeling of catastrophe, and I never failed to weep in sympathy.

What comes back very portentously are the visits to the manse.

These occurred in the afternoon, and my father usually took me, though sometimes the nurse came along, too. I see them in retrospect as ordeals of the first magnitude.

There was my grandfather – the Parson, as everyone called him – bending down to kiss me. His black beard awed me. And it had a scent of its own. Was it of ginger or a cross between ginger and talcum powder? His eyes were kindly, gentle and humorous, but I was always tense in his

presence. And this tension was probably increased by the presence of my father whom I feared. Even at this green age, I could sense a certain resentment in his attitude towards me. Then, naturally, I was ignorant of what was behind it. All I knew was that something made him perpetually impatient with me. Something made it necessary for him to snap and bark at me.

Whenever in the manse, he seemed to go out of his way to try to demonstrate what I can only describe as the “compensatory” side of me. I can almost hear him thinking behind scowls: “Oh, well, he may be dark-skinned, but he does seem to have some intelligence”. These demonstrations would take the form of quizzes. He would ask me questions before my grandfather and aunts in order to hear me give the correct answers.

But there came the afternoon when I let him down.

As clearly as though it happened the day before yesterday, I can see myself, a small boy of three, standing beside my grandfather’s bed upstairs in the manse. My grandfather was bed-ridden at the time. My father quizzed me as usual, and I managed to answer correctly the first two or three questions. Then he leant towards me and asked: “And now tell Grandpa – what is the young of a sheep called?”

“A calf,” I replied.

“Don’t be silly!” barked my father. “What is the young of a *sheep* called? A *sheep*!”

I began to throw baffled, desperate glances about me.

“Come on, come on! Speak up!”

“I don’t know,” I murmured.

“You do know. Come on. What is the young of a sheep called?”

“A goat,” I stammered, shaking.

My father bellowed at me. My grandfather remonstrated at him in a low voice from the bed. I began to howl. But this only spurred my father to sterner action. He grabbed me by the arm and hauled me off downstairs to the study. In there, he bent low, his face red and angry, and bawled at me: “What is the young of a sheep called, you little fool?”

I tried to stammer out an answer through my blubbering, but it was still the wrong one.

“What is the young of a sheep called?” bellowed my father, and he danced in his rage. No cliché. No exaggeration. His feet always moved agitatedly when he was enraged.

Abruptly Aunt Carrie came to the rescue. Her name was Caroline Fraser, and she was a thin, small person. She was related in some way to Uncle John’s wife. She lived in the manse with my real aunts and kept house. Her eyes spurted fury as she drew me protectively against her skirt. I can hear her outraged voice as she said to my father: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, Willy? He’s only a child.”

"He's a little fool!" shouted my father, stamping. And undaunted, he bent down towards me and bellowed: "What is the young of a sheep called?"

"Yah-ow!" I yelled, clutching at Aunt Carrie's skirt.

"What is the young of a sheep called?"

Aunt Carrie's head came low, and she murmured: "A lamb, dear."

Then she turned again upon my father and counterattacked in my defence. It was a painful, rather ugly – for me, utterly terrifying – scene.

There is another aspect of terror associated with the manse. Elvira.

She was the cook – a negress with cross eyes. She would appear suddenly just before I was taken upstairs to see my grandfather – she probably opened the door for my father or the nurse, if I happened to have been brought by the nurse – and she would say something to me, her eyes rolling fantastically. I would recoil and whimper, shuddering and wriggling in fright.

Probably at first she did not intend to produce this effect, but later, I am sure, realising the power of her eyes over me, she used to do it on purpose. I can remember, even at home, my nurse threatening, when I was naughty, to take me to Elvira if I did not behave myself. Ever since those days, the name Elvira has lurked in my imagination, a symbol of evil. I could not possibly name a character Elvira in one of my novels unless I depicted her as someone sinister.

It can be frustrating to try disentangling the events of one's early childhood. Individual incidents loom up with clarity, but you can never be sure which came before the other. I know that these visits to my grandfather took place before my fourth birthday, because I know that my grandfather died during the year 1913, but did they occur before or after (or before *and* after) my father lost his job at S.D. & Co.?

One of his colleagues in the office was a certain Angus Fraser, of the Fraser family into which my Uncle John had married, and it appears that Uncle Angus (that's what I used to call him when I got to know him a few years later) had been indulging in a number of bookkeeping acrobatics – called in newspaper reports "defalcations". There must even have been "embezzlement" as well. Anyway, my father discovered these defalcations, was horrified, but, not wanting to get Uncle Angus into trouble, kept silent. Foolish of him, for he must have realised that Uncle Angus could not get away with it for ever. Inevitably came the exposure. The chopper fell on Uncle Angus, with a sideswipe for my father who was blamed for not reporting the irregularities the moment he had discovered them.

My mother has often spoken – and spoken with great bitterness – of what she had to endure during that year or more when my father was out of work. He took it badly. He has always had a great sense of responsibility, and I can well imagine the agonies he must have suffered.

My maternal grandmother, who lived with her two daughters (my Aunt Bertha and Aunt Maud) in a cottage in Coburg Street, suggested that we

should come and live with her until the situation improved. It must have been hurtful to my father's pride, but he agreed, and we moved in on my grandmother. Moved in, as it happened, to stay.