

PHILIP

Patrimony

ROTH

a true story

"A tough-minded,
beautifully written
memoir.... It smacks of
honesty and
truthfulness on
every page."

—San Francisco Chronicle

PATRIMONY

NONFICTION/LITERATURE

A deeply resonant portrait of a father and son.... Roth has looked past all comfort and condolence to find the truth—about himself and his father; about death and the fear of it; and about the absolute vulnerability to which love condemns us all.”—Sven Birkerts, *Chicago Tribune*

Patrimony, a true story, touches the emotions as strongly as anything Philip Roth has ever written. Philip Roth watches as his eighty-six-year-old father—famous for his vigor, his charm, and his repertoire of Newark recollections—battles with the brain tumor that will kill him. The son, full of love, anxiety, and dread, accompanies his father through each fearful stage of his final ordeal, and, as he does so, discloses the survivalist tenacity that has distinguished his father's long, stubborn engagement with life.

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PHILIP

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藏书章

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VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL

Philip Roth
PATRIMONY

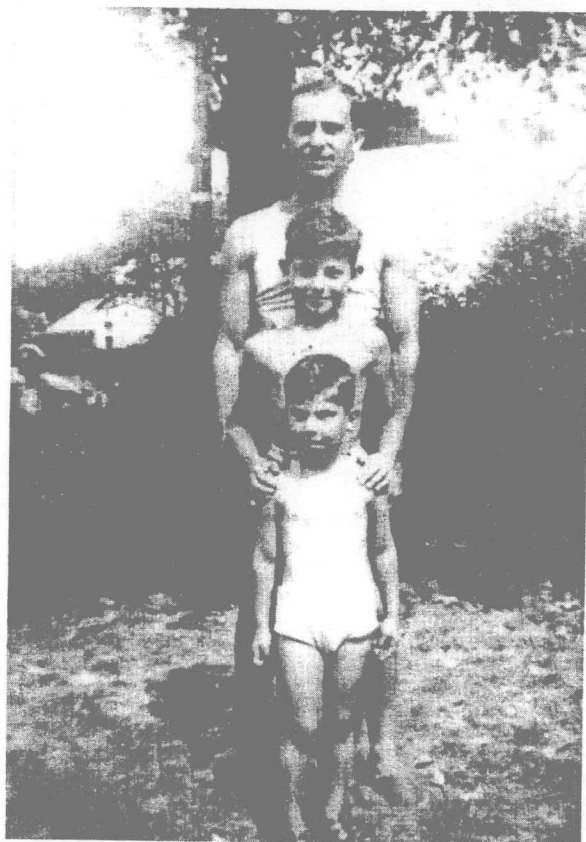
Philip Roth received the 1960 National Book Award in Fiction for *Goodbye, Columbus*. In the last decade he has twice received the National Book Critics Circle Award—in 1987 for the novel *The Counterlife* and in 1992 for *Patrimony*. His other books include the trilogy and epilogue *Zuckerman Bound*; the novels *Letting Go*, *My Life as a Man*, and *The Professor of Desire*; the political satire *Our Gang*; and the autobiography *The Facts*. *Operation Shylock* won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and was chosen by *Time* magazine as the best American novel of 1993. His latest book is *Sabbath's Theater*, which received the 1995 National Book Award for Fiction.



Books by Philip Roth

Sabbath's Theater
Operation Shylock ✓
Patrimony ✓
Deception
The Facts
The Counterlife
Zuckerman Bound
The Prague Orgy ✓
The Anatomy Lesson
Zuckerman Unbound
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The Breast
Our Gang
Portnoy's Complaint ✓
When She Was Good
Letting Go
Goodbye, Columbus ✓

PATRIMONY



Philip Roth

PATRIMONY

A True Story

VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL

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*Frontispiece photograph: Herman, 36, Sandy, 9, and Philip Roth, 4;
Bradley Beach, New Jersey, August 1937.*

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*For our family,
the living and the dead*

PATRIMONY

1

Well, What Do You Think?

My father had lost most of the sight in his right eye by the time he'd reached eighty-six, but otherwise he seemed in phenomenal health for a man his age when he came down with what the Florida doctor diagnosed, incorrectly, as Bell's palsy, a viral infection that causes paralysis, usually temporary, to one side of the face.

The paralysis appeared, out of nowhere, the day after he had flown from New Jersey to West Palm Beach to spend the winter months sharing a sublet apartment with a retired bookkeeper of seventy, Lillian Beloff, who lived upstairs from him in Elizabeth and with whom he had become romantically involved a year after my mother died in 1981. At the West Palm airport, he had been feeling so fit that he hadn't even bothered with a porter (whom, besides, he would have had to tip) and carried his own luggage from the baggage area all the way out to the taxi stand. Then the next morning, in the bathroom mirror, he saw that half his face was no longer his. What had looked like him the day before now looked like nobody—the lower lid of the bad eye bagged downward, revealing the lid's inner lining, the cheek on that side had gone slack and lifeless as though beneath the bone had been filleted, and his lips were no longer straight but drawn down diagonally across his face.

With his hand he pushed the right cheek back to where it had been the night before, holding it there for the count of ten. He did this repeatedly that morning—and every day thereafter—but when he let go, it wouldn't stay. He tried to tell himself that he had lain the wrong way in bed, that his skin was simply furrowed from sleep, but what he believed was that he'd had a stroke. His father had been crippled by a stroke back in the early 1940s, and once he'd become an old man himself, he said to me sev-

eral times, "I don't want to go the way he did. I don't want to lie there like that. That's my worst fear." He told me how he used to stop off to see his father at the hospital early in the morning on the way downtown to the office and again on his way home at night. Twice a day he lit cigarettes and stuck them in his father's mouth for him and in the evening he sat beside the bed and read to him from the Yiddish paper. Immobilized and helpless, with only his cigarettes to soothe him, Sender Roth lingered for almost a year, and until a second stroke finished him off late one night in 1942, my father, twice each day, sat and watched him die.

grand-father

The doctor who told my father that he had Bell's palsy assured him that in a short time most, if not all, of the facial paralysis would be gone. And within days of his getting this prognosis, it was confirmed for him by three different people, in just his section of the vast condominium development, who'd had the same ailment and recovered. One of them had had to wait for nearly four months, but eventually the paralysis went away as mysteriously as it had come.

His didn't go away.

He soon couldn't hear out of his right ear. The Florida doctor examined the ear and measured the hearing loss, but told him it had nothing to do with the Bell's palsy. It was just something that happened with age—he had probably been losing the hearing in the right ear as gradually as he had lost the sight in the right eye and only now had noticed it. This

time when my father asked how much longer the doctor thought he'd have to wait before the Bell's palsy disappeared, the doctor told him that in cases that continued as long as his had, it sometimes never disappeared. Look, count your blessings, the doctor said; except for a blind eye, a deaf ear, and a half-paralyzed face, he was as healthy as a man twenty years younger.

When I phoned each Sunday, I could hear that as a consequence of the drooping mouth, his speech had become slurred and difficult to follow—he sounded at times like someone fresh from the dental chair whose novocaine hadn't worn off; when I flew to Florida to see him, I was startled to find him looking as though he might not be able to speak at all.

"Well," he said, in the lobby of my hotel, where I was meeting Lil and him for dinner, "what do you think?" Those were his first words, even as I bent over to kiss him. He was sunk down beside Lil in a tapestried love seat, but his face was aimed straight up at me so that I could see what had happened. Over the last year he had intermittently been wearing a black patch over his blind eye to prevent the light and the wind from irritating it, and what with the eye patch, the cheek, the mouth, and the fact that he had lost a lot of weight, he seemed to me gruesomely transformed—in the five weeks since I'd last seen him in Elizabeth—into an enfeebled old man. It was hard to believe that only some six years earlier, the winter after my mother's death, when he was sharing the Bal Harbour apartment of his old friend Bill

Weber, he'd had no difficulty convincing the wealthy widows in the building—who'd immediately begun to swarm with interest around the gregarious new widower in the fresh seersucker jacket and pastel trousers—that he had only just reached seventy, even though we had all gathered together to mark his eightieth birthday the summer before in my house in Connecticut.

At dinner in the hotel I began to understand how much of a handicap the Bell's palsy was, in addition to being disfiguring. He could now drink successfully only by using a straw; otherwise the liquid ran out the paralyzed half of his mouth. And eating was a bite-by-bite effort, laden with frustration and embarrassment. Reluctantly he agreed, after spotting his tie with his soup, to allow Lil to wrap a napkin around his neck—there was already a napkin across his lap, more or less protecting his trousers. Occasionally Lil reached over with her own napkin and, to his disgruntlement, removed a piece of food that had slipped out of his mouth and adhered to his chin without his knowing it. Several times she reminded him to put less food on his fork and to try, with each bite, to take into his mouth a little less than he was accustomed to. "Yeah," he mumbled, staring disconsolately into his plate, "yeah, sure," and after two or three bites he forgot. It was because eating had become a depressing ordeal that he had lost all this weight and looked so pathetically undernourished.

What made everything still more difficult was

that cataracts in both his eyes had thickened in recent months, so that even the sight in his one good eye had grown blurry. For several years my ophthalmologist in New York, David Krohn, had been following the progress of my father's cataracts and dealing with his deteriorating vision, and when, in March, my father returned to New Jersey from his unhappy stay in Florida, he went to New York to urge David to remove the cataract from the good eye; because he was powerless to do anything about the Bell's palsy, he was particularly eager that some action be taken toward restoring his sight. But late in the afternoon following my father's visit, David phoned to say that he was reluctant to operate on the eye until further tests had determined the cause of the facial paralysis and the hearing loss. He wasn't convinced that it was Bell's palsy.

He was right not to be. Harold Wasserman, my father's New Jersey physician, had arranged locally for the MRI scan that David ordered, and when Harold received the report from the lab, he called me early that evening to give me the results. My father had a brain tumor, "a massive tumor," Harold called it, and though with MRI pictures one couldn't distinguish between a benign and a malignant tumor, Harold said, "Either way, those tumors kill you." The next step was to consult with a neurosurgeon, to determine precisely the kind of tumor it was and what, if anything, might be done. "I'm not optimistic," Harold said, "and neither should you be."

I managed to get my father to the neurosurgeon without telling him what the MRI had already disclosed. I lied and said that the tests showed nothing, but that David, being extra cautious, wanted to get one last opinion on the facial paralysis before he went ahead with the cataract removal. In the meantime, I arranged for the MRI pictures to be sent to the Essex House Hotel in New York. Claire Bloom and I were temporarily living there while we were looking for an apartment—we were planning to find a place in Manhattan after ten years of dividing our lives between her house in London and mine in Connecticut.

In fact, only about a week before the MRI pictures of my father's brain, along with the radiologist's report, were delivered to the hotel in an oversized envelope, Claire had returned to London to see her daughter and to look after repairs on her house and to meet with her accountant over a long-standing negotiation with the British tax authorities. She had been yearning terribly for London, and the month's visit was designed not merely to let her attend to practical matters but to take the edge off her homesickness. I suppose that if my father's tumor had been discovered earlier, when Claire was with me, my preoccupation with him would not have been so all-consuming, and—at least in the evenings—I might have been less likely to become as depressed about his illness as I did on my own. Yet even at the time it seemed to me that Claire's absence—along with the fact that in a hotel, feeling transient and

homeless, I was finding it impossible to write—was a peculiarly opportune fortuity: with no other responsibilities, I could attend entirely to him.

Being by myself also allowed me to be as emotional as I felt, without having to put up a manly or mature or philosophical front. Alone, when I felt like crying I cried, and I never felt more like it than when I removed from the envelope the series of pictures of his brain—and not because I could readily identify the tumor invading the brain but simply because it *was* his brain, my father's brain, what prompted him to think the blunt way he thought, speak the emphatic way he spoke, reason the emotional way he reasoned, decide the impulsive way he decided. This was the tissue that had manufactured his set of endless worries and sustained for more than eight decades his stubborn self-discipline, the source of everything that had so frustrated me as his adolescent son, the thing that had ruled our fate back when he was all-powerful and determining our purpose, and now it was being compressed and displaced and destroyed because of "a large mass predominantly located within the region of the right cerebellopontine angles and prepontine cisterns. There is extension of the mass into the right cavernous sinus with encasement of the carotid artery . . ." I didn't know where to find the cerebellopontine angles or prepontine cisterns, but reading in the radiologist's report that the carotid artery was encased in the tumor was, for me, as good as reading his death sentence. "There is also apparent destruction of the right pe-

trous apex. There is significant posterior displacement and compression of the pons and right cerebellar peduncle by this mass . . ."

I was alone and without inhibition, and so, while the pictures of his brain, photographed from every angle, lay spread across the hotel bed, I made no effort to fight back anything. Maybe the impact wasn't quite what it would have been had I been holding that brain in the palms of my hands, but it was along those lines. God's will erupted out of a burning bush and, no less miraculously, Herman Roth's had issued forth all these years from this bulbous organ. I had seen my father's brain, and everything and nothing was revealed. A mystery scarcely short of divine, the brain, even in the case of a retired insurance man with an eighth-grade education from Newark's Thirteenth Avenue School. *father*

My nephew Seth drove my father up to Millburn to see the neurosurgeon, Dr. Meyerson, in his suburban office. I had arranged for my father to see him there rather than at Newark's University Hospital because I thought the mere location of the doctor's hospital office, which I had been told was in the oncology wing, would signal to him that he had a cancer, when no such diagnosis had been made and he didn't even know yet that he had the tumor. This way he wouldn't be frightened out of his skin, at least for a while.

And when I spoke to Dr. Meyerson on the phone

later that day, he told me that a tumor like my father's, located in front of the brain stem, was benign about ninety-five percent of the time. According to Meyerson, the tumor could have been growing there for as long as ten years; but the recent onset of facial paralysis and deafness in the right ear suggested that "in a relatively short time," as he put it, "it'll get much worse." It was still possible, however, to remove it surgically. He told me that seventy-five percent of those operated on survive and are better, ten percent die on the table, and another fifteen percent either die shortly afterward or are left worse.

"If he survives," I asked, "what is the convalescence like?"

"It's difficult. He'd be in a convalescent home for a month—maybe as long as two or three months."

"It's hell, in other words."

"It's rough," he said, "but do nothing and it could be rougher."

I wasn't about to give Meyerson's news to my father on the phone, and so the next morning, when I called at around nine, I said I was going to come over to Elizabeth to see him.

"So, it's that bad," he said.

"Let me drive over and we'll sit down and talk about it."

"Do I have cancer?" he asked me.

"No, you don't have cancer."

"What is it then?"

"Be patient for another hour and I'll be there and tell you exactly what the situation is."

"I want to know now."

"I'll only be an hour—less than an hour," I said, convinced that it was better for him to have to wait, however frightened he was, than to tell him flat out on the phone and have him sitting alone, in shock, until I arrived.

It was probably no wonder, given the task I was about to perform, that when I got off the turnpike in Elizabeth, I missed the fork in the exit road that would have taken me into North Avenue and directly to my father's apartment building a few blocks away. Instead, I wound up on a stretch of New Jersey highway that, a mile or two on, passed right alongside the cemetery where my mother had been buried seven years before. I didn't believe there was anything mystical about how I'd got there, but it was amazing nonetheless to see where the twenty-minute drive from Manhattan had landed me.

I had been to the cemetery only twice, first on the day of her funeral in 1981 and the following year, when I took my father out to see her stone. Both times we had driven from Elizabeth proper and not from Manhattan, and so I hadn't known that the cemetery could even be reached by the turnpike. And had I actually been driving over to find the cemetery that day, I more than likely would have lost my way in the complex of turnoffs to Newark Airport, Port Newark, Port Elizabeth, and back to downtown

Newark. Though I wasn't searching for that cemetery either consciously or unconsciously, on the morning when I was to tell my father of the brain tumor that would kill him, I had flawlessly traveled the straightest possible route from my Manhattan hotel to my mother's grave and the grave site beside hers where he was to be buried.

I hadn't wanted to leave my father waiting any longer than was absolutely necessary, yet having arrived where I had, I was unable to continue on by as though nothing unusual had happened. I didn't expect to learn anything new by going off and standing at the foot of my mother's grave that morning; I didn't expect to be comforted or strengthened by her memory or better prepared somehow to help my father through his affliction; nor did I figure I'd be weakened substantially seeing his plot beside hers. The accident of a wrong turn had brought me there, and all I did by getting out of the car and entering the cemetery to find her grave was to bow to its impelling force. My mother and the other dead had been brought here by the impelling force of what was, after all, a more unlikely accident—having once lived.

I find that while visiting a grave one has thoughts that are more or less anybody's thoughts and, leaving aside the matter of eloquence, don't differ much from Hamlet's contemplating the skull of Yorick. There seems little to be thought or said that isn't a variant of "he hath borne me on his back a thousand

times." At a cemetery you are generally reminded of just how narrow and banal your thinking is on this subject. Oh, you can try talking to the dead if you feel that'll help; you can begin, as I did that morning, by saying, "Well, Ma . . ." but it's hard not to know—if you even get beyond a first sentence—that you might as well be conversing with the column of vertebrae hanging in the osteopath's office. You can make them promises, catch them up on the news, ask for their understanding, their forgiveness, for their love—or you can take the other, the active approach, you can pull weeds, tidy the gravel, finger the letters carved in the tombstone; you can even get down and place your hands directly above their remains—touching the ground, *their* ground, you can shut your eyes and remember what they were like when they were still with you. But nothing is altered by these recollections, except that the dead seem even more distant and out of reach than they did when you were driving in the car ten minutes earlier. If there's no one in the cemetery to observe you, you can do some pretty crazy things to make the dead seem something other than dead. But even if you succeed and get yourself worked up enough *to feel their presence*, you still walk away without them. What cemeteries prove, at least to people like me, is not that the dead are present but that they are gone. They are gone and, as yet, we aren't. This is fundamental and, however unacceptable, grasped easily enough.

2

Mommy, Mommy, Where Are You, Mommy?

MMy father's retirement pension from Metropolitan Life provided him with more than enough to live on in the modest no-frills style that seemed to him natural and sufficient for someone who grew up in near-poverty, worked slavishly for some forty years to give his family a secure, if simple, home life, and lacked the slightest interest in conspicuous con-

sumption, ostentation, or luxury. In addition to the pension he'd been receiving now for twenty-three years, he drew Social Security income and the interest on his accumulated wealth—some eighty thousand dollars' worth of savings accounts, CDs, and municipal bonds. Despite his solid financial situation, however, in advanced old age he had become annoyingly tight about spending anything on himself. Though he did not hesitate to give generous gifts to his two grandsons whenever they needed money, he was continually saving inconsequential sums that deprived him of things he himself liked or needed.

Among the more distressing economies was his refusal to buy his own *New York Times*. He worshiped that paper and loved to spend the morning reading it through, but now, instead of buying his own, he waited all day long to have a copy passed on to him by somebody in his building who had been feckless enough to fork over the thirty-five cents for it. He'd also given up buying the *Star-Ledger*, a fifteen-cent daily that, along with the defunct *Newark News*, he had read ever since I was a child and it was called the *Newark Star-Eagle*. He also refused to retain, on a weekly basis, the cleaning woman who used to help my mother with the apartment and the laundry. The woman now came one day a month, and he cleaned the apartment himself the rest of the time. "What else do I have to do?" he asked. But as he was nearly blind in one eye and had a cataract thickening in the other and was no longer as agile as he liked to imag-

ine, no matter how hard he worked the job he did do was awful. The bathroom smelled, the carpets were dirty, and few of the appliances in the kitchen could have passed muster with a health inspector who hadn't been bribed.

It was a comfortably furnished, rather ordinary three-room apartment, decorated with neither flair nor bad taste. The living room carpet was a pleasant avocado green and the furniture there mostly antique reproductions, and on the walls were two large reproductions (chosen for my parents nearly forty years back by my brother, who had been to art school) of Gauguin landscapes framed in wormwood as well as an expressionistic portrait that my brother had painted of my father in his early seventies. There were thriving plants by the row of windows that faced a quiet, tree-lined, residential street to the south; there were photos in every room—of children, grandchildren, daughters-in-law, nephews, nieces—and the few books on the shelves in the dining area were either by me or on Jewish subjects. Aside from the lamps, which were a little glitzy ornate and surprisingly uncharacteristic of my mother's prim, everything-in-its-place aesthetic, it was a warm, welcoming apartment whose gleaming appearance—at least when my mother was still alive—was somewhat in contrast to the depressing lobby and hallways of the thirty-year-old building, which were uninvitingly bare and growing slightly dilapidated.

Ever since my father had been alone, when I

was visiting, I'd sometimes wind up, after having used the toilet, scouring the sink, cleaning the soap dish, and rinsing out the toothbrush glass before I returned to sit with him in the living room. He insisted on washing his underclothes and his socks in the bathroom rather than parting with the few quarters that it cost to use the washer/dryer in the basement laundry room; every time I came to see him, there were his grayish, misshapen things draped over wire hangers on the shower rod and the towel racks. Though he prided himself on being nattily dressed and always enjoyed putting on a nicely tailored new sports jacket or a three-piece Hickey-Freeman suit (enjoyed it particularly when he'd bought it at an end-of-season sale), he had taken to cutting corners on whatever wasn't visible to anyone else. His pajamas and handkerchiefs, like his underwear and socks, looked as though they hadn't been replaced since my mother's death.

When I got to his apartment that morning—after the inadvertent visit to my mother's grave—I quickly excused myself and went off to the toilet. First I'd missed a turnoff, and now in the bathroom I was taking another few minutes to rehearse for a final time the best way to tell him about the tumor. While I stood over the bowl, his undergarments hung all around me like remnants strung out by a farmer to scare the birds away. On the open shelves above the toilet, where there was an assortment of prescription drugs, as well as his Polident, Vaseline, and Ascrip-

tin, his boxes of tissues, Q-tips, and absorbent cotton, I spotted the shaving mug that had once been my grandfather's; in it my father kept his razor and a tube of shaving cream. The mug was pale blue porcelain; a delicate floral design enclosed a wide white panel at the front, and inside the panel the name "S. Roth" and the date "1912" were inscribed in faded gold Gothic lettering. The mug was our one family heirloom as far as I knew, aside from a handful of antique snapshots the only thing tangible that anyone had cared to save from the immigrant years in Newark. I had been intrigued by it ever since my grandfather had died a month short of my seventh birthday and it made its way into our Newark bathroom, back when my father was still shaving with a bristle brush and shaving soap.

Sender Roth had been a remote, mysterious presence to me as a small boy, an elongated man with an undersized head—the forebear whom my own skeleton most resembles—and about whom all I knew was that he smoked all day long, spoke only Yiddish, and wasn't much given to fondling the American grandchildren when we all showed up with our parents on Sundays. After his death, the shaving mug in our bathroom brought him much more fully to life for me, not as a grandfather but, even more interestingly then, as an ordinary man among men, a customer of a barbershop where his mug was kept on a shelf with the mugs of the other neighborhood immigrants. It reassured me as a child to think that