

Reginald Sweeney

I'm not sure what you want me to say here. I've heard several people describe their past lives and they all sound so interesting, whether or not you can warm to them as individuals. All that I can say about myself is that I am totally unremarkable and that I have led a totally unremarkable life.

I was born in 1884 in Providence, Rhode Island, where my father had a gents' outfitters. I guess you would call it a haberdashery. I was always meant to take over the business and worked alongside my father behind the counter for nearly twenty years. He despised most forms of formal education but I was made to study bookkeeping at a local college. I don't think he really trusted me to run the business and only handed over to me after the war in 1919, when he was about to die.

He was probably right in his assessment. He said I always had my nose in a book and my head in the clouds. And not the sort of books he was interested in. In the first few years the store was reasonably successful. I married, rather late in life, and at first things seemed to be going well. But already by the late twenties it was clear that I was not cut out to be a businessman. Competition became stiffer and I seemed to be losing customers at an alarming rate. My father was long dead and my mother, who in her quiet, evangelical, way had always tried to compensate for my father's, probably justified, exasperation passed away eight years later.

Betty, my wife, was ten years younger than me. As I said, at first we seemed happy together but as the store headed gradually towards the rocks and our efforts to have a family came to nothing she became more and more bitter. She appeared to take over my father's role. And in 1937 she just walked out and disappeared. I was shattered and my efforts to trace her were a complete failure, though I did hear various rumours of other men.

I sold what was left of the business for a song and moved to New York, just to get away. I've never been back to Providence since. Life was very hard at first. I had a little money but it didn't go far and all I could afford was a two room rented apartment in Queens. I'm still there. With my limited business and bookkeeping experience I was

able to get work and it became a bit easier during the war when young men were called up and manpower became scarcer. I can't afford to retire and I'm still in the same tiny apartment. But I am still employed, as bookkeeper and clerk in a small publishing house in Manhattan and I suppose you could say that I am as content, if not exactly happy, as I'm ever likely to be.