

Your main commentary should be focused on *compounding*. Other topics may also be addressed

It surprised no one to learn that Michael Beard had been an only child, and he would have been the first to concede that he'd never quite got the hang of brotherly feeling. His mother, Angela, was an angular beauty who doted on him, and the medium of her love was food. She bottle-fed him with passion, surplus to demand. Some four decades before he won the Nobel Prize in Physics, he came top in the Cold Norton and District Baby Competition, birth-to-six-months class. In those harsh postwar years, ideals of infant beauty resided chiefly in fat, in Churchillian multiple chins, in dreams of an end to rationing and of the reign of plenty to come. Babies were exhibited and judged like prize marrows, and, in 1947, the five-month-old Michael, bloated and jolly, swept all before him. However, it was unusual at a village fete for a middle-class woman, a stockbroker's wife, to abandon the cake-and-chutney stall and enter her child for such a gaudy event. She must have known that he was bound to win, just as she later claimed always to have known that he would get a scholarship to Oxford. Once he was on solids, and for the rest of her life, she cooked for him with the same commitment with which she had held the bottle, sending herself in the mid-sixties, despite her illness, on a Cordon Bleu cookery course so that she could try new meals during his occasional visits home. Her husband, Henry, was a meat-and-two-veg man, who despised garlic and the smell of olive oil. Early in the marriage, for reasons that remained private, Angela withdrew her love from him. She lived for her son, and her legacy was clear: a fat man who restlessly craved the attentions of beautiful women who could cook.

Henry Beard was a lean sort with a drooping mustache and slicked-back brown hair, whose dark suits and brown tweeds seemed a cut too large, especially around the neck. He provided for his miniature family well and, in the fashion of the time, loved his son sternly and with little physical contact. Though he never embraced Michael, and rarely laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder, he supplied all the right kinds of presents - Meccano and chemistry sets, a build-it-yourself wireless, encyclopedias, model airplanes, and books about military history, geology, and the lives of great men. He had had a long war, serving as a junior officer in the infantry in Dunkirk, North Africa, and Sicily, and then, as a lieutenant colonel, in the D Day landings, where he won a medal. He had arrived at the concentration camp of Belsen a week after it was liberated, and was stationed in Berlin for eight months after the war ended. Like many men of

his generation, he did not speak about his experiences and he relished the ordinariness of postwar life, its tranquil routines, its tidiness and rising material well-being, and, above all, its lack of danger - everything that would later appear stifling to those born in the first years of the peace.

40 In 1952, when Michael was five, the forty-year-old Henry Beard gave up his job at a merchant bank in the City and returned to his first love, which was the law. He became a partner in an old firm in nearby Chelmsford and stayed there for the rest of his working life. To celebrate the momentous change and his liberation from the daily commute to Liverpool Street, he bought himself a secondhand Rolls Royce Silver Cloud. This pale-blue machine lasted him thirty-three years, until his death. From the vantage of adulthood, and with some retrospective guilt, his son loved him for this grand gesture. But the life of a small town solicitor, absorbed by matters of conveyancing and probate, settled on Henry Beard an even greater tranquility. At weekends, he mostly cared for his roses, or his car, or golf with fellow Rotarians. He stolidly accepted his loveless marriage as the price he must pay for his gains.

50 It was about this time that Angela Beard began a series of affairs that stretched over eleven years. Young Michael registered no outward hostilities or silent tensions in the home, but, then, he was neither observant nor sensitive, and was often in his room after school, building, reading, gluing, and later took up pornography and masturbation full time, and then girls. Nor, at the age of seventeen, did he notice that his mother had retreated, exhausted, to the sanctuary of her marriage.