



VINTAGE

A WORD CHILD

IRIS MURDOCH

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About the Book

Hilary Burde, saved by education from a delinquent childhood, cheated out of Oxford by a tragic love
tangle, cherishes his obsessive guilt and disappointment in a dull, orderly civil service job. When the
man whom he has harmed and betrayed reappears as head of his department, Hilary hopes for
forgiveness, even for redemption and a new life, but finds himself haunted by a ghostly repetition.

About the Author

Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin in 1919 of Anglo-Irish parents. She went to Badminton School in Bristol, and read classics at Somerville College, Oxford. During the war she was an Assistant Principal at the Treasury, and then worked with UNRRA in London, Belgium and Austria. She held a studentship in Philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, and then in 1948 she returned to Oxford where she became a Fellow of St Anne's College. Until her death in February 1999, she lived with her husband, the teacher and critic John Bayley, in Oxford. Awarded the CBE in 1976, Iris Murdoch was made a DBE in the 1987 New Year's Honours List. In the 1997 PEN Awards she received the Gold Pen for Distinguished Service to Literature.

Following her writing debut in 1954 with *Under the Net*, Iris Murdoch wrote twenty-six novels, including the Booker Prize-winning *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Other literary awards she received include the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973) and the Whitbread Prize for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974). Her works of philosophy include *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) and *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997). She wrote several plays including *The Italian Girl* (with James Saunders) and *The Black Prince*, adapted from her novel of the same name.

Fiction

Under the Net
Flight from the Enchanter
The Sandcastle
The Bell
A Severed Head
An Unofficial Rose
The Unicorn
The Italian Girl
The Red and the Green
The Time of the Angels
The Nice and the Good
Bruno's Dream
A Fairly Honourable Defeat
An Accidental Man
The Black Prince
The Sacred and Profane Love Machine
Henry and Cato
The Sea, The Sea
Nuns and Soldiers
The Philosopher's Pupil
The Good Apprentice
The Book and the Brotherhood
The Message to the Planet
The Green Knight
Jackson's Dilemma

Non-Fiction

Sartre: Romantic Rationalist
Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues
Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals
Existentialists and Mystics

A WORD CHILD

Iris Murdoch

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Ray Monk

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTRODUCTION

IRIS MURDOCH'S REPEATED insistence that philosophy and literature are quite distinct, and that her novels should not be read as if they were philosophical treatises, is one to which she herself did not always adhere. At a key moment in her last major philosophical work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, for example, she adds to her discussion of the 'infinitely great net of language' the parenthetical request: '(See a philosophical discussion of these matters in my first novel, *Under the Net*)'. Of course her novels are not philosophical treatises, but, equally obviously, there is a great deal of philosophy in them.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in *A Word Child*. To read this wonderful novel as if it were a lecture or an article in a learned journal would be to do it an enormous injustice. It is as finely crafted a piece of fictional writing as Murdoch ever wrote; its pace lively, its characterisation sharp, and its dense plot tightly controlled and deeply involving. And yet, while it is assuredly not a 'novel of ideas', one would have to be entirely ignorant of Murdoch's non-fictional writing not to notice that it is suffused throughout with the themes that dominated her philosophical thinking. Around the time that she wrote *A Word Child*, Murdoch gave a lecture to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, entitled 'Salvation by Words', in which she argued that literature was the art which is 'the most practically important for our survival and our salvation', for:

Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being, since they are the most refined and delicate and detailed, as well as the most universally used and understood, of the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence. We become spiritual animals when we become verbal animals. The *fundamental* distinctions can only be made in words. Words are spirit.

A Word Child presents both an illustration of this thesis and a challenge to it. Its central character and narrator, Hilary Burde, says of himself: 'I discovered words and words were my salvation. I was not except in some very broken-down sense of that ambiguous term, a love child. I was a word child'. As a matter of fact, as he has already told us, he *was* a love child, the illegitimate offspring of (so Hilary was informed before he knew what the word meant) a 'tart' and a man he never knew. After his mother died, when he was seven, Hilary was sent to be looked after by his aunt, who developed a fierce hatred of him and who abandoned him to an orphanage, where he vented his anger and bitterness on those around him with acts of increasingly ferocious and pointless violence. His 'salvation through words' came via a homosexual French teacher at his 'filthy little school' who recognised in him an acute intelligence and a gift for languages and patiently guided him to a place in Oxford to read French and Italian. At Oxford, for a while at least, he flourished. He gained the top first of his year, won every prize he went in for, lost his northern vowels and was given a fellowship. Everything was in place for a glittering career and a complete escape from the horrors of his childhood.

When we first meet Hilary, twenty years have passed since his glittering undergraduate career, and it is clear that, somehow, he has made a terrible mess of it. He is not an eminent Oxford don, but an embittered, sarcastic and unlikeable middle-aged man, eking a living as a clerk in the lower reaches

the civil service. He feels himself to be a failure, suffers from a deep self-loathing, adheres to an obsessively rigid routine and takes no pleasure in anything except the perusal of foreign dictionaries. This is not a man who has achieved salvation, but rather one in desperate need of it. If words offer the ultimate texture and stuff of *his* moral being, we might feel, then the 'salvation' they offer is a pretty poor one. Indeed, he looks less like an illustration of Murdoch's view of the spiritual power of words than a devastating counter-example to it.

This sense of Murdoch setting out to challenge her own exalted view of the place of literature and spiritual growth is heightened by the character of Crystal, Hilary's sister, to whom he is devoted. Like him, she has suffered much, but, unlike him, she has remained uneducated and inarticulate. And yet spiritually, she seems in better shape, able still both to recognise goodness in others and to strive to be good herself. What has happened, then, to the doctrine that 'words are spirit'?

The answer ties in with the theme that dominates Iris Murdoch's entire oeuvre, both as philosopher and as a novelist: the question of how, in the absence of God and conventional religion, we are to be guided morally. Crystal is humble and simple enough to allow herself to be guided by the biblical quotations she learned as a child. Quoting from *Philippians*, she urges her brother 'Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest . . . think of these things'. Having rejected the Christianity that was forced upon him as child, Hilary disdains such advice, and, in doing so, throws out the moral baby with the religious bathwater. Iris Murdoch's own view, developed at length in her two major philosophical works, *The Sovereignty of Good* and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, is summarised in the novel by Crystal's boyfriend, Arthur, one of the few people in Hilary's office whose position in the hierarchy is actually lower than his and who, therefore, Hilary dismisses as a non-entity. 'I don't believe in God either', Arthur tells Hilary:

But I think one should try to stick to simplicity and truth. There may be no God, but there's decency and – and there's truth and trying to stay there. I mean to stay in it, in its sort of light, and trying to do a good thing and to hold onto what you know to be a good thing.

The fact that this view is here expressed so inarticulately seems itself to present a challenge to Murdoch's faith in the redemptive power of being a 'word child'. But what has undone Hilary is not his mastery of words, his intelligence, or his cultural sophistication. What has undone him is his lack of moral strength.

Hilary's promising career at Oxford came to end when he had an affair with the wife of one of his colleagues and then became responsible for her death in a traffic accident caused by his recklessness. What has destroyed him is guilt. However, though torturing himself over the incident, and putting up with his dreary and joyless life as a kind of penance for his sins, he has learned nothing from it, as is shown when Gunnar Jopling, the colleague he betrayed, comes back into his life and Hilary grotesquely repeats his old mistake by falling in love with Gunnar's second wife. The problem is not that Hilary is incurably wicked, it is that the very liveliness of his intellect renders him perpetually liable to succumb to fantasies of his own making. Precisely because he is a 'word child', he is vulnerable to temptations to stray from the simple, honest, true path adhered to by Arthur and Crystal. This does not mean that it is better to be stupid than clever, better to be uneducated than educated. What it does mean is that 'word children' have, if anything, *more* need of simple moral guidance than the illiterate and the inarticulate.

The point is illustrated throughout the novel by repeated reflections on the story of Peter Pan, which Hilary's office are planning to perform as a Christmas play. Hilary's romantic interpretation of the

play sees Peter Pan as ‘reality breaking in’ to the dreary lives of the Darlings. On the contrary, says Arthur, what is real is the Darlings’ home life, and Peter Pan should rather be seen as ‘spirit gone wrong’. The hero of the story, according to Arthur, is Nana the dog, who, by showing fear of Peter, shows that she is the only one who recognises him for what he is. ‘I mean’, says Arthur, ‘the spiritual urge is mad unless it’s embodied in some ordinary way of life’. ‘You must remember that Nana is only a dog’, protests Hilary. ‘Exactly’, says Arthur. ‘There’s nothing bogus about Nana. Nana doesn’t talk’.

But, of course, Nana is *not* the hero of *Peter Pan*, any more than bestial wordlessness is Iris Murdoch’s moral ideal. One is reminded here of Wittgenstein’s response to Norman Malcolm when Malcolm remarked that G. E. Moore’s childlike innocence was to his credit. ‘I can’t understand that’, Wittgenstein said, ‘unless it’s also to a *child*’s credit. For you aren’t talking of the innocence a man has fought for, but of an innocence which comes from a natural absence of temptation’. Words separate us from the rest of the animal kingdom, but, in doing so, they present us with temptations with which other animals are not faced, chief among which is to mistake the creations of our own imagination for reality. Hilary’s understanding of *Peter Pan*, which sees the promise of Never-Never Land as ‘reality breaking in’, epitomises the moral fragility that goes with being a ‘word child’. The solution to this problem is not to renounce the imagination and thus aspire to the state of Nana the dog; rather it is to see the products of the imagination *as* products of the imagination and reality *as* reality. When Hilary imagines that he can drive Anne Jopling away from Oxford in his car and that they can be happy together ever afterwards, he is mistaking his dreams for reality, convincing himself that he can live forever in Never-Never Land. No, the *real* hero of the Peter Pan story is Wendy, who, as Arthur puts it, ‘is the human being seeking truth’. She compromises, of course, in living half her life in an unreal world, which is a defeat, ‘but a fairly honourable defeat’ and ‘the best we can hope for’.

In spite of all his guilt, self-recriminations and self-loathing, Hilary fails to grasp the true nature of his mistake with Anne Jopling, and therefore, when Gunnar comes back into his life with his beautiful new wife Kitty, he seems destined to repeat it. Significantly, the moment he falls in love with Kitty, he and she are sitting under the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens. He imagines that his love for Kitty is redemptive, that it lends his life a seriousness it lacked before and that it lifts him onto a higher spiritual plane, but of course – as he comes eventually to realise – in all this, he is fooling himself. Precisely because words are pre-eminent among the ‘symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence’, the articulate can tell themselves stories that are extremely difficult to distinguish from reality.

Words are our salvation when used to describe reality; when mistaken *for* reality, they become our prison. This, I think, lies at the heart of Iris Murdoch’s Platonism. She feels that she *has* to believe in goodness as an externally, objectively existing entity, because, otherwise, all we have is the word ‘good’, and the word, by itself, can provide no moral guidance whatever. Only if it stands for something, something outside itself, can it have any real moral force. ‘Word is spirit’, but, just as a spirit can go bad, as it does in the person of Peter Pan, when it becomes disembodied from an ordinary walk of life, so words can go bad, when, as symbolised by Hilary’s absorption in dictionaries and his mastery of the languages of countries he never intends to visit and bodies of literature he never intends to read, they become divorced from the things for which they stand.

Hilary’s moral task is to see his romantic dreams *as* dreams, and to see that *real* love is not what he felt for Anne or for Kitty, but what Arthur feels for Crystal and what his poor, inexplicably loyal girlfriend, Thomasina (‘Tommy’), feels for him. As Peter Pan is traditionally played by a girl,

Hilary's colleagues at the office had tried to persuade Tommy to take on the part, but, in the end, she decides that it is not a role she wants to play. What she wants is to marry Hilary and to have children with him, to, as it were, persuade him to play the role of Mr Darling: persuade him to accept reality, become fully human. At the end of the novel, it is an open question whether he will accept the challenge or not. What is clear however is that, if he does accept it, in Iris Murdoch's eyes, he will not have betrayed his origins as a 'word child' – rather he will have brought to fruition the promise of salvation that words offered him.

Raymond
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THURSDAY

'I SAY, AN absolutely stunning coloured girl was here looking for you.'

'She was looking for you.'

'No. I offered myself. She was uninterested. She said she wanted to see Mr Hilary Burde.'

That was me. 'Oh.' It was all very improbable however. 'Did she say what she wanted?'

'No. By the way, the rubbish chute is jammed again.'

The first speaker was my lodger Christopher Cather. We had met accidentally in the street, I on my return from the office, he on his return from whatever he did during the day. We were in the lift. The lift held two people and rose slowly, groaning with diffidence. To intensify mutual inspection it contained a long mirror. Christopher was easy to look at.

We emerged on our floor, the fourth, where a smell confirmed the jamming of the rubbish chute. Mr Pellow, a suspended schoolmaster, standing half inside the doorway of the next door flat, retired slowly. He wanted a drinking companion. Christopher and I shunned him.

We entered our own flat. I picked up two letters which were lying on the floor. We parted company, I to my bedroom, he to his. I turned on the light, revealing my unmade bed, a pile of underwear, dumped upon the discarded debris of my struggle with the world. I stuffed the underwear inside the bed and dragged up the blankets, inhaling without displeasure the familiar badger smell. The curtains had remained pulled across the windows since my hurried early morning departure into the dark. It was winter: November, with late gloomy dawns and a cold wind smacking the leaves about on sticky pavements. The season suited me. Even at forty-one it dawns on one that one will not live forever. *Adieu jeunesse.*

My 'home' was a small mean nasty flatlet in Bayswater, in a big square red-brick block in a cul-de-sac. Outside the cul-de-sac was a busy noisy street, beyond that street were some modest dingy shops, beyond the shops was Bayswater tube station (District Line and Inner Circle), beyond that was Queensway tube station (Central Line), beyond that was Bayswater Road, and beyond that was, thank God, the park. I instinctively denigrate my flat: it was doubtless my own life which was small and nasty. The flat was certainly cramped and dark, looking out onto a maze of fire escapes in a sunless well. There were three little rooms, my bedroom, Christopher's bedroom, and the so-called sitting-room into which Christopher, who preferred life at floor level, had lately moved most of the furniture, including the bed, out of his own room. Thus rendered uninhabitable, the sitting-room was never used in any case. The flat was simply a *machine à dormir* as far as I was concerned. I never spent my evenings there as the place swarmed with demons. The week-ends posed problems. I cursed the five-day week. I had never attempted decoration, having no taste. I desired no personal objects, no 'elegance', nothing that could remind me of the past. There was nothing here to love.

I will briefly explain Christopher. Christopher, whose estranged father was a solicitor in Essex, was at the time of this story, twenty-three, but already had a glorious past. He was rather beautiful and turned many heads, including some in the pages which follow. He was tall and extremely thin with a lot of tangled fairish hair hanging to his shoulders and a narrow face of clear-complexioned pallor. In summer he had freckles. His eyes were of a blue so pale as to have given him an appearance of weakness had not his large straight nose manifested a countervailing strength. He was graceful, it was like having a lynx or a leopard around the place. He always wore what I would describe as 'fanciful'

dress'. As a lodger he was less than satisfactory, being an out-of-work genius. At least he did occasionally work, cleaning people's flats. I do not know who the lunatics were who allowed Christopher to clean their flats. The glorious past amounted to this, that at the age of eighteen Christopher created and led a pop group called the Treason of the Clerks which had a brief but considerable success. The success took place mainly on a tour of Australia, but one of the Treason songs made the 'top ten' in this country. It was called *Waterbird* and may still be remembered by connoisseurs. It was a song about somebody leaving somebody and the chorus ran *Think again waterbird, do do do, waterbird, waterbird, boo boo boo*, or something of the sort. The group made a lot of money (which vanished leaving only debts to the Income Tax) and then broke up. One stayed in Sydney, one went to Mexico, another (the composer of *Waterbird*) took to heroin and died. Christopher returned to London and for a while earned a precarious living as an organizer of 'happenings'. (His father paid the Income Tax.) Then he underwent a conversion to Buddhism and dedicated himself to overcoming duality and passing beyond the bounds of conceptual thought. He was wished on me as a lodger by a friend who said, as you need money and are never in why not let me have your room? Christopher now owed six weeks' rent. At least he obeyed the rules I made: no hi fi, no girls, not more than three visitors at a time, no eating of chocolate in the house, no discussions of sex in my presence (etcetera, etcetera). Girls in the flat would have disturbed me. Boys came and went, especially two, Mick Ladderslow and Jimbo Davis. Mick was a layabout from a rich family who wanted Christopher to start a new group to be called The Waterbirds (only Christopher was now given over to God). Jimbo was a ballet dancer and even more graceful than Christopher, a laconic Welsh boy whom I liked and who could at least dance. (I saw him do so once in a theatre.) Mick had no talents except for trouble. I thought of them as 'students' though they studied nothing but pleasure. They were beautiful mindless creatures who padded in and out like animals; I did not have the unnerving feeling of being surrounded by rational beings. They (and sometimes others) would sit in Christopher's room and partake of various drugs, a remarkably quiet occupation of which I took care to know nothing. Christopher was learning to play the 'tabla', a dreary little oriental drum, but at least it was not a noisy instrument and would always stop abruptly at my command. In general they were, for young people, all remarkably silent, sitting together I presumed in a kind of daze, in intervals of drawing mandala and consulting the *I Ching*. I did not know whether these boys were 'queer' (in the slang sense). Quite possibly not. Christopher said he had had a surfeit of girls in the old Treason days when they were 'all over him'. I felt sorry for him. There is nothing like early promiscuous sex for dispelling life's bright mysterious expectations.

The wind was moodily rattling the windows, producing that odd not unpleasant sense of solitude which winter winds evoke. After a long day in the office and undergoing my fellow men in the turbulent rush hour I felt tired and crumpled and begrimed with weariness. A hard monotonous life favours salvation, so the sages say. There must have been some other element, absent in my case. Oh the piercing sadness of life in the midst of its ordinariness! I looked at the two letters. One was from Tommy, and I set that aside unopened. The other was the telephone account. I opened this and studied it. Then I went out and kicked Christopher's door and entered. Christopher was sitting cross-legged on the floor examining some stuff in a box. He looked up guiltily and when he saw the telephone account in my hand he blushed. He had a remarkable gift for blushing.

'Christopher,' I said, 'you promised you would not make any more long-distance calls.'

Christopher stood up. 'I'm very sorry, Hilary, I ought to have told you at the time, only I was too scared to, please don't be cross! I promise it won't happen again.'

'You promised last time. Or was that a Buddhist promise, remote from the world of men.'

appearance where one pays telephone bills?’

‘I really promise this time. And I’ll pay you back.’

‘What with? You already owe me six weeks’ rent.’

‘I *will* pay. Please forgive me, Hilary, and don’t be cross. I can’t bear it when you’re cross. I really truly promise not to do it again.’

‘You promise. You really promise. You really truly promise. Where in the series does genuine promising begin?’

‘I really and truly and honestly promise —’

‘Oh cut it out,’ I said. ‘I told you if you did it again I’d get rid of the ’phone.’

‘You can’t mean it, Hilary, we must have the telephone, you’ll think better of it —’

‘I won’t have time to,’ I said.

I went into the hall. The offending instrument stood on a small bamboo table beside the front door. I took hold of the wire low down and pulled hard. There was a rending pattering sound and the board came away from the wall together with some of the skirting board and a shower of plaster. The wire would not break. I put one foot on it and pulled hard until it snapped, precipitating me back onto the table. I crushed the table against the wall, smashing one of its legs. The telephone crashed onto the floor and broke open disgorging multi-coloured wirey entrails. The dial came off and rolled away into a corner. Silence.

‘Oh — Hilary —’ Christopher, pale under his pallor, stared down at the wreckage. He was shaken.

I went into my bedroom and shut the door. I would have liked to leave the flat immediately after this episode, but it was my night for dining with the Impiatts (Thursday) and I usually changed for them (not into ‘evening dress’, just my shirt and tie). I shaved for them too. I always needed a five o’clock shave, only had one on Thursdays. Having dealt with that matter at the wash basin in my bedroom, I took off my dirty office shirt and greasy tie and put on a white shirt and a decent foulard. I combed my hair and resumed coat and overcoat. I already regretted my destruction of the telephone. I had only had two drinks at the Sloane Square station bar on the way home. Suppose Crystal were to need me urgently? I emerged.

Christopher, still agitated, was waiting for me. ‘Hilary, I’m frightfully sorry, please don’t be angry with me, I’ll mend the table —’ He spoke as if he had done the damage.

‘I’m not angry,’ I said. He was between me and the door. I took him by the shoulders and set him gently aside. I felt him wince (with alarm, with distaste?) as I touched him. I got out of the door. My Pellow watched me with glazed eyes from the darkness of his hallway. He was sitting down now. He had been suspended for hitting a troublesome pupil. How I sympathized with him. I went down in the lift, alone this time. Outside, the breath of autumn’s being was chasing round in circles after leaves and newspapers and old cigarette packets. By the time I reached the park I felt a little better. London is unreal north of the park and south of the river. Unreality reaches its peak on the horrible hills of Hampstead. For me the park was the great divide between myself and a happier land into which I once thought that I was destined to enter. It was not to be. It turned out that I was unfit for ordinary life. I was always sorry that I had been too young to be in the war. I would have enjoyed the war.

‘Hilary dear,’ said Laura Impiatt, opening the door and kissing me.

The Impiatts, a childless couple full of good works and enterprises, lived in Queen’s Gate Terrace occupying the lower part of one of those rather overwhelming houses. I hung up my clothes in the hall

in the way in which Laura had long ago taught me to do, and followed her into the drawing-room.

‘Hello, Hilary,’ said Freddie, who was opening a bottle.

Clifford Larr, who sometimes came on Thursdays, bowed aloofly.

Freddie Impiatt and Clifford Larr both worked at my office. I call it my office, but it was more like their office as they were both considerably senior to me. It would have been difficult not to be. I worked in Whitehall, in a government department, it boots not which. I worked in the section called ‘establishments’ which deals with the administration of the office itself. I dealt with pay, not with the metaphysics of pay but with its mechanics. It was a dullish unexacting job, but I did not dislike it. I occupied a humble obscure position and when promotion time came was regularly ‘passed over’ (Expressive phrase: a beat of triumphant wings, then silence.) In the office hierarchy I was, if one omits typists and clerks, near to the bottom. I worked to a man called Duncan, now briefly seconded to the Home Office, who worked to a Mrs Frederickson, now on maternity leave, who worked to Freddie Impiatt, who worked to Clifford Larr, who worked to someone too exalted to be in question here, who worked to someone more exalted still, who worked to the head of the department Sir Brian Templeton Spence, who was now about to retire. Arthur Fisch worked to me. Nobody worked to Arthur.

Freddie then was much my senior, and Clifford Larr almost at vanishing point. It was therefore notably kind of Freddie and Laura to invite me regularly to their house, since I was so particular about nobody. It was the more notably kind since both Freddie and Laura were snobs: not gross snobs of course, but quiet intelligent surreptitious beavering-away snobs, as most cultured middle-class people are, unless there is some positive quality of character or education to stop them. They pursued and cultivated all sorts of ‘grandees’ and had them to dinner, but of course not on the days when I was there. When they gave cocktail parties I was not asked. Important office men such as Clifford Larr rarely appeared on my days, and titled people and famous writers never. Laura imagined that she concealed this discrimination by remarks such as ‘It’ll be just us, we’re going to be selfish and keep you to ourselves!’ However these aspirations made their unrewarded kindness to me the most touching. It took them a little while to understand the peculiar rigidity with which my life was arranged but they did understand it and they respected it. I had dinner with the Impiatts every Thursday. Sometimes, though not too often, they cancelled me in favour of something more amusing. But they never asked me to change the day.

As I may sometimes seem in what follows to mock the Impiatts let me here make it clear once and for all that I thoroughly liked them both, as we often do those whom we mock. I thought they were decent people and I admired them because they were happily married, quite a feat in my estimation. Of course this latter achievement is not always totally endearing. The assertion made by a happy marriage often alienates, and often is at least half consciously intended to alienate, the excluded spectator. The brightness of the Impiatt hearth made me feel sometimes like a slinking sniffing wolf. And they, the happy ones, like to have a wolf about, like to glimpse him now and then from the window and hear his hungry howling. How rarely can happiness be really innocent and not triumphant, not an insult to the deprived. How offensive it can be, the natural instinctive showing off of decent happy people.

‘Have some more sherry, Hilary, just a smidgin?’ A new fashionable word of Laura’s. Diminutive of ‘smudge’?

‘Thanks.’

‘You’re wearing odd socks again. Look, Freddie, Hilary’s wearing odd socks again!’ This was a regular joke which I was tired of. I would have checked my socks but for the telephone episode.

‘I’ve been admiring your luscious stockings, I can’t take my eyes off your ankles.’ I talked this so

of vulgar nonsense to Laura. I always acted the goat with the Impiatts, they seemed to expect. Sometimes there was not a pin to choose between me and Reggie Farbottom, the office comic.

Laura, no longer either young or slim, was a good-looking woman. She came of a Quaker family and had given up her education to marry Freddie, a fact to which she often alluded. She was, like her husband, extremely energetic. There was something of the games-mistress. Will and energy poured from her, often in the form of a sort of anxiety, possibly an anxiety always to be doing something worth-while. She had a sweet radiant intense face and those very wide-apart eyes which give a slight dazed and dazing mesmeric effect to the glance. She grinned rather than smiled and had a deep resonant emphatic incisive cultured voice which could be tiring to listen to. Some word in each sentence had to be rather comically emphasized: a sign more of shyness than of the bossiness which she often seemed to express. She was always quipping. Her eyes were a fine chestnut brown and her hair once a dark brown and now rather grey, had until lately been bound about her head in two severe plaits. Now however she had taken to wearing it loose, streaming down her back nearly to her waist. This was disconcerting: a woman with long streaming grey hair cannot but look a little strange especially if her eyes glitter with some exalted yearning. Now that her hair was down Laura's energy quite undiminished, seemed to have become more diffused, less directed and prosaic, as if she were recovering some of the misty electrical indeterminateness of youth. She had also lately developed a taste for flowing robes. Tonight she was wearing an ankle-length tent of green shot silk, split up the side to reveal blue stockings. She always dressed up for our Thursdays, even if it was only me. I do not fail to note this, and she knew I noted it. No wonder I shaved.

'How is Christopher?' said Laura. She took a maternal interest in my young people.

'Much the same. Harmless. Picturesque. Useless.'

'Have you given Christopher a day?' The reference was to my having regular days of the week for seeing my friends.

'No one under thirty is allowed to have a day.'

'Is that a rule? I think you've just invented it!'

'Hilary lives by rules,' said Freddie. 'He separates everything from everything.'

'And everyone from everyone!' said Laura.

'Separation is the essence of a bachelor's existence,' I said.

'He likes to live in other people's worlds and have none of his own.'

'Hilary is all things to all men.'

'Who do you think will succeed Templar-Spence?' said Clifford Larr.

They went off into office gossip. Laura disappeared to the kitchen. She was a good cook if you liked that sort of cooking. I contemplated the drawing-room and marvelled at the expensive knick-knack and the absence of dust. Freddie and my fellow guest had got on to the economy. 'The Sibyl's leaving what an image of inflation!' said Clifford Larr.

I never minded being left out of serious conversations. Ignorance should prompt modesty. And it suited me to be the one left to amuse the girls. Women are rarely pompous. I had no instinct to please the man as layer down of law. Freddie Impiatt did so with a touching unawareness. Freddie was stout, a waistcoat wearer, not tall, a little bald, monumental and greying, a kind conceited man with a broad honest head and a pleasant horsy smile. He could not pronounce his r's. Clifford Larr was thin and tall, a bit dandified, not an easy man, nervous, sarcastic, armed with conscious superiority, no sufferer from fools, one of those prickly unwelcoming reserved eccentrics in whom the Civil Service abounds.

'*A table, à table!*'

Talking of the pound, they followed me down the stairs in answer to Laura's shout.

'Fancy French muck again, Hilary!'

'I sympathize with Wittgenstein who said he didn't mind what he ate so long as it was always the same.'

'Hilary lives on baked beans when he isn't here. What did you have for lunch today, Hilary?'

'Baked beans, of course.'

'Have some white wine, Hilary.'

'Just a smidget.'

'Are those boys at your place still smoking pot?'

'I don't know what they do.'

'Another case of separation!'

'I must come and see them again,' said Laura. 'I'm writing another article. And I feel I might be able to help them somehow. All right, Hilary, no need to sneer!'

Laura, as part of the latest exaltation, was attending lectures on sociology and writing intellectual women's page journalism about 'the young'.

'The young are so selfless and brave compared with us.'

'Yah.'

'I mean it, Hilary. They *are* brave. They take such big decisions and they don't worry about money and status and they aren't afraid to live in the present. They put their whole lives at risk for the sake of ideas and experience.'

'More fools they.'

'I'm sure you were fearfully anxious and careful when you were young, Hilary.'

'I thought about nothing but my exams.'

'There you are. When are you going to tell me about your childhood, Hilary?'

'Never.'

'Hilary is pathologically discreet.'

'In my view, the pound should not have been allowed to float,' said Clifford Larr.

'With this crisis on we've decided to stay at home for Christmas.'

'You know so many languages, Hilary, but you never travel.'

'I think Hilary never leaves London.'

'I think he never leaves the perimeter of the royal parks.'

'Do you still run round Hyde Park every morning, Hilary?'

'What's your view of the pound, Hilary?'

'That it should bash every other currency to pieces.'

'Hilary is so competitive and chauvinistic.'

'I love my country.'

'So old-fashioned.'

'If you sing *Land of Hope and Glory*, Freddie will sing *Soviet Fatherland*.'

'Patriotism used to be taught in schools,' said Clifford Larr.

'My school regarded patriotism as bad form,' said Freddie.

'Eton is so bolshy,' said Laura.

'The government will fall on price increases,' said Clifford Larr.

'I'm fed up with hearing the proles binding about the price of meat,' said Freddie.

'Why don't they eat caviare.'

'Hilary has missed the point as usual.'

'They don't have to eat beef all the time, we don't.'

‘They could live on beans, Hilary does.’

‘Or pilchards. Or brown rice. Much healthier.’

‘All right. I just don’t like Freddie’s vocabulary.’

‘Hilary is so combative.’

‘Talking of proles, Hilary, I wish you’d tell Arthur Fisch not to let those drunks visit him at the office.’

‘They aren’t drunks, they’re drug addicts.’

‘But do you agree, Hilary?’

‘I agree.’

‘I mean, it won’t do.’

‘Hilary, has Freddie told you about the office pantomime?’

‘No, I haven’t told him. It’s to be *Peter Pan*.’

‘Oh no!’

‘Don’t you like *Peter Pan*, Hilary?’

‘It’s my favourite play.’

‘Hilary thinks Freddie will desecrate it.’

‘No need to ask who will play Hook and Mr Darling.’

‘The director always bags the star part.’

‘Freddie is an actor *manqué*.’

‘A great ambiguous work of art,’ said Clifford Larr. ‘Will you favour a Freudian interpretation?’

‘No, I think a Marxist one.’

‘Ugh.’

‘Don’t be so negative, Hilary.’

‘Why not a Christian interpretation, Peter as the Christ Child?’

‘Hilary says why not a Christian interpretation!’

‘Reggie Farbottom will play Smee.’

‘Aaargh.’

‘Hilary is envious.’

‘I must be going now,’ said Clifford Larr. He always left early. We all trooped upstairs.

After he had gone and we were sitting in the drawing-room drinking coffee he was of course discussed.

‘Such an unhappy man,’ said Laura. ‘I’m so sorry for him.’

‘I don’t know anything about him,’ I said, ‘but I don’t know why you assume he’s unhappy. You two are always assuming people are unhappy so that you can pity them. I suspect you think he’s unhappy just because he isn’t married. You probably think I’m unhappy. As soon as I’ve gone you’ll say, “Poor Hilary, I’m so sorry for him, he’s so unhappy”.’

‘Don’t bite us, Hilary,’ said Freddie. ‘Some whisky?’

‘A smudgeling.’

‘A what?’

‘A smudgeling.’

‘Well, I persist in thinking he’s unhappy,’ said Laura, pouring the whisky. ‘He looks like an interesting man but he’s so stiff and solemn and he only wants to talk about the pound. He never talks about anything personal. I think he’s got a secret sorrow.’

‘Women always think men have secret sorrows. It’s a way of separating them from other women.’

‘And men like you, Hilary, always think women are against other women.’

‘That’s right, darling, hit him back.’

‘And he wears a cross round his neck.’

‘Clifford? *Does* he?’

‘Something on a chain anyway, I think it’s a cross, I saw it through his nylon shirt last summer.’

‘You aren’t angry with me, are you, Laura?’

‘Of course not, silly! Hilary talks big but it’s quite easy to put him down.’

‘Clifford can’t be *religious*, can he?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Freddie, ‘he’s so remote and clammed up, I doubt if he has any real friends all. He might be a Roman Catholic. I certainly daren’t ask.’

‘Laura thinks he needs a woman.’

‘Hilary’s crest soon rises again!’

‘I want to play Smee.’

‘Hilary just wants to spite Reggie.’

‘Are you serious, Hilary? If you would like to you can be a pirate —’

‘Of course I’m not serious. You know what I think about the office pantomime.’

‘Hilary is anti-life.’

‘Yes, thank God.’

‘I’m just going to find that brandy,’ said Freddie. He went off.

I was never sure whether Freddie’s departures on my Thursdays were purely accidental or whether they were concerted with Laura so that she could interrogate me in a more intimate way. She certainly always set about probing at once and made the most of her time.

‘I think you’ve got a secret sorrow, Hilary.’

‘I’ve got about two hundred.’

‘Tell me one.’

‘I’m getting old.’

‘Nonsense. How is Crystal?’

‘All right.’

‘How is Tommy?’

‘All right.’

‘Hilary, you are a chatterbox!’

When I left the Impiatts the evening was not yet over for me. I did not stay late since I was expected elsewhere well before midnight. Of course I did not tell my hosts this, they would have thought it ‘boform’. On Thursdays I always went to fetch Arthur Fisch away from Crystal. (Crystal is my sister. This ‘fetching away’ was an old tradition. The idea was that Crystal sometimes found Arthur hard to get rid of and so I was to come and remove him. Or was it that I had decided to control, in both the French and English senses, my sister’s relations with this young fellow? The origin of the arrangement was lost in history. And indeed Arthur was no longer all that young, none of us was.)

Crystal lived in a bed-sitter flat in one of the shabby little streets beyond the North End Road, and at a brisk pace I could do the walk from Queen’s Gate Terrace in about twenty minutes. I always walked in London if I could. Crystal was over five years my junior and, like myself, unmarried. She had had various jobs. She had been a waitress, a clerk, she had worked in a chocolate factory. She was not modestly set up as a dressmaker, but seemed to spend most of her time altering her neighbours’ skirts.

for a few pence. I subsidized her a bit. No one could have lived more cheaply than Crystal. Her biggest weekly expenses were entertaining Arthur and me. The Impiatts never invited Crystal to dinner as she was too ignorant to be presentable. Laura used to invite her to tea occasionally.

Crystal lived alone in a small shabby terrace house. Her bed-sitter, with tiny kitchen annex occupied the upper floor. There was a bath in the kitchen. The lavatory was on the ground floor, where there was also a dentist's surgery and waiting-room. The basement was intermittently occupied by a motor cycle repairer and (we thought) receiver of stolen goods in a small way. The whole area was, as it was then, very decrepit and poor. The stucco of the fronts, once painted different colours, had faded into a uniform grime and fallen off in patches to reveal ochre-coloured brick beneath. Here and there a gaping or boarded window or a doorless doorway proclaimed the abandonment of hope. The inhabitants were mostly 'protected tenants' at low rents (Crystal was such a one) for whom the landlords found it not worth their while to do repairs.

I let myself in with my key and made my way upstairs. Crystal and Arthur were sitting at the table. They both rose when I entered, behaving as usual as if they were slightly afraid of me. They always acted a little guiltily on these occasions. Not because they had been making love, because they had not. Crystal, at thirty-seven, was still a virgin. Arthur was in love with her, but nothing happened, though I certainly knew. This evening I thought the atmosphere was rather more charged than usual, as if they had interrupted some particularly intense discussion. This annoyed me. Arthur was rather red in the face, and Crystal made little awkward darting movements to simulate some neutral and innocuous activity. Perhaps they had just been holding hands. A bottle of cheap wine, brought by Arthur, stood on the table. Crystal hardly drank. There was always plenty left for me.

I sat down at the table in the third chair. They sat down. The table was an ancient kitchen table of straw-coloured deal with a pleasant ridgy grainy surface out of which Crystal vigorously scrubbed the bread crumbs. It never wore a cloth, except when I came to supper with Crystal on Saturday evening. We sat there under the naked central light like three conspirators. Crystal had cleared the dishes. Arthur poured me out a glass of wine.

'What did you have for supper?'

'Shepherd's pie and beans and apricot tart and custard,' said Crystal. She shared my taste in food. She still had her northern accent. I had got rid of mine.

'What did you have at the Impiatts?' Arthur asked. We always asked each other this.

'*Quenelles de brochet. Caneton à l'orange. Profiteroles.*'

'Oh.'

'You did better,' I said.

'I'm sure we did!' said Crystal, smiling her utterly innocent uncomplacent smile at Arthur, who grinned.

Let me try to describe Crystal. She cannot be said to be beautiful. She was short and dumpy, she had no perceptible waist. She had pretty small well-worn capable hands which moved a lot, like a pair of little birds. She was round-faced and rather pallid or even pasty. She rarely took any exercise. Her hair was orange-brown and fuzzy and fell in a thick heavy mat almost to her shoulders. She had a large mouth with a prominent moist lower lip, very mobile. Rather bad teeth. A wide and distinctly upturned nose. Her eyes were hazel, of the kind which are pure golden without a hint of green, but they were usually hidden behind thick round spectacles which made them look like gleaming stones. None of this really describes Crystal however. How is it possible to describe someone to whom you are once in love? Crystal often appeared stupid. She was like a sweet gentle patient good animal.

Arthur was a little taller than Crystal, considerably shorter than me. He had a tentative humorous

face of a rather dated sort. (Not that he was ever witty, he was far too timid.) He had soupy brown eyes and an apologetic much-chewed mouth and a well-grown but not quite drooping brown moustache. His hair was rather greasy, not long, hanging in lank brown waves. He looked like some unidentified person in a nineteenth-century photograph. He wore oval steel-rimmed glasses. This sounds like a prejudiced description. Let me try to amend it. He was an honest man devoid of malice. His soupy eyes could express feeling. (I do not wear glasses. My eyes are hazel like Crystal's. Crystal and I had different fathers.)

I never lingered long on Thursday evenings. I liked to condition those about me, and Arthur was conditioned to reach for his coat as soon as I arrived. He had in fact already reached for it. I took Crystal's little busy hand. I did not mind Arthur's presence any more than that of a dog. 'All right, my darling?'

'All right, dear. Are you all right?' We always asked each other this.

'Yes, yes. But are you really all right?'

'Of course. I've got a new lady. She wants a cocktail costume. Such lovely stuff. Shall I show you?'

'No. Show me on Saturday.' I kissed her wrist. Arthur rose. A minute later we were outside in the wind.

I felt that emotion again, the emotion in Arthur from whatever had happened during the evening something more than usual. I wondered if I should question him, decided not to. We walked up the North End Road. Arthur lived in Blythe Road. The wind was suddenly very cold, a winter wind. I felt something out of darkness grab at me, an old old thing.

'Freddie was on about your junkies again,' I said.

'I can't stop them from coming to the office.'

'You could stop collecting them.'

Arthur was silent. The wind blew bitterly. Arthur was wearing a sensible absurd woollen cap. My head was uncovered. I usually wore a flat cloth cap when it got really cold. Time to dig it out. I had forgotten to tell Crystal about the telephone. I must remember to do so on Saturday.

'Has Freddie decided about the panto?' Arthur asked.

'Yes. *Peter Pan*.'

'Oh goodie!'

We reached the corner of Hammersmith Road, where we parted.

'Good night.'

'Good night.'

'Hilary —'

'Good night.'

I walked abruptly away. It was after midnight when I got to Bayswater. There was silence in the flat. I glanced quickly through Tommy's letter. The usual rigmarole! I went to bed in my underclothes. (This shocked Christopher.) I had never had any sleep problems since the orphanage. A talent for oblivion is a talent for survival. I laid my head down and merciful pain-killing sleep covered me fathoms deep. Not to have been born is undoubtedly best, but sound sleep is second best.



BEFORE DESCRIBING THE events of Friday I must (while, as it were, I am asleep) talk at more length about myself. I have mentioned my work, my age (forty-one), my sister, the colour of my eyes. I was born in a town in the north of England which I will not name since for me its memory is accursed. Let it for whom it may be holy ground. I do not know who my father was, nor who Crystal's father was. Presumably, indeed certainly, they were different men. I was informed, before I knew what the word meant, that my mother was a 'tart'. It is strange to think that my father probably never knew I existed. My mother died when I was nearly seven and Crystal was an infant. I have no memory of my mother except as a sort of state, a kind of Platonic remembrance. I think it is a memory of a state of being loved, a sense certainly of some lost brightness, an era of light before the darkness started. Immense tracts of my childhood are inaccessible to memory, and I cannot remember any incident from those first years. Crystal used to possess a photograph allegedly of our mother, but I tore it up, not of course out of resentment.

After our mother's death we were taken over by Aunt Bill, my mother's sister. I suppose her name was Wilhelmina. (I never knew my mother's first name, and later it was impossible to ask. Aunt Bill always referred to her, in an indescribably offensive tone, as 'your ma'.) Aunt Bill lived in the same town, in a caravan. I cannot to this day see a caravan without shuddering. Aunt Bill kept Crystal with her in the caravan, but me she fairly soon (I do not know exactly how soon) despatched to an orphanage. I had, with my first self-consciousness, an awareness of myself as 'bad', a bad boy, one who had to be sent away.

It is impossible for me to 'try to be fair' to Aunt Bill. There are some things which are so difficult that one does not even know how to try to do them. Because of an incident concerning a pet mouse which I can scarcely bring myself to think of let alone to relate, I detested Aunt Bill forever with a hatred which can still make me tremble. The particular way Aunt Bill had of stepping on insects provided my earliest picture of human wickedness. I am not sure that I have ever bettered it. In any case, Aunt Bill and I were instant enemies, not least because she deliberately separated me from Crystal. Aunt Bill was an uneducated ill-tempered spiteful woman full of malice and resentment. I will not use the word 'sadistic' of her; this suggests a classification and thereby a sort of extenuation. When, many years later, I heard of her death, I intended to go out and celebrate but found myself simply sitting at home shedding tears of joy. Aunt Bill was, of course, a tough egg. ('Brave' carries the wrong implications.) She carried on her war against the world in her own personal way exerting her own personal power, and in this she might even be said to have had some kind of distinction. She was my first conception of a human individual. (Crystal was part of me.) Let what can be said for her. She got rid of me. She might have got rid of Crystal too. Crystal was small enough to be adopted. I was of course too old for adoption, even apart from my precocious reputation for being thoroughly disturbed and 'bad'.) But she kept Crystal and looked after her; and though she got an allowance for doing so I doubt if she did it for the money. Aunt Bill never worked that I can remember. She and Crystal lived on National Assistance in the caravan.

I shall not talk about the orphanage: again, fairness is probably impossible. It was not that I was beaten (though I was) or starved (though I was always hungry); it was just that nobody loved me. In fact I early took in that I was unlovable. Nobody singled me out, nobody gave me their *attention*. I have no doubt that some of the people there were good well-intentioned folk who tried to approach me, and that I rejected them. I have a shadowy idea that this may have been so. I can hardly remember the early years at the orphanage. When the light of memory falls I was already as it were old, old and

scarred and settled in a posture of anger and resentment, a sense of having been incurably maimed by injustice.

The most profound and maiming piece of injustice was the separation from Crystal. I cannot remember anything about the event of Crystal's birth, but I can recall her in infancy and trying to carry her in my arms. I felt none of the jealousy the earlier child is supposed to experience. I loved Crystal at once in a sort of prophetic way, as if I were God and already knew all about her. Or as if she were God. Or as if I knew that she was my only hope. My younger sister had to be my mother, and I had to be her father. No wonder we both became a little odd. The orphanage was not too far away from the caravan site, and I must have seen quite a lot of Crystal in the earlier time after my mother's death. I have memory pictures of Crystal aged two, three, four, and the sense that we played together. But as I developed more and more into a 'bad' boy I was allowed to see less and less of my sister. It was supposed that I would be 'bad for her'. And by the time I was eleven we were almost completely separated. I saw her on occasional holiday outings and at Christmas. The anguish of these occasions did nothing to lighten my reputation for being 'disturbed'. One Christmas time I arrived at the caravan to find Aunt Bill slapping Crystal's face. I attacked Aunt Bill's legs, which was all I could get at. She kicked me and I spent Christmas Day in hospital.

My reputation for 'badness' was not unmerited. I was a strong child and soon given to violence. I was not bullied by other children. I did the bullying. (These are disagreeable memories. Am I still a monster in the dreams of those I injured then?) I was good at games and excelled at wrestling. These activities gave me my first conception of 'excellence', inextricably mixed up with the idea of defeating someone, preferably by physical force. Many years later a social worker (little knowing that I was myself something of an expert on the matter) told me that criminals who not only rob but qui- gratuitously injure their victims as well, do so out of *anger*. This seems to me very plausible. I was brimming with anger and hatred. I hated, not society, puny sociologists' abstraction, I hated the universe. I wanted to cause it pain in return for the pain it caused me. I hated it on my behalf, on Crystal's, on my mother's. I hated the men who had exploited my mother and ill-treated her and despised her. I had a cosmic furious permanent sense of myself as victimized. It is particularly hard to overcome resentment caused by injustice. And I was so lonely. The bottomless bitter misery of childhood: how little even now it is understood. Probably no adult misery can be compared with a child's despair. However I was better off than some. I had Crystal, and I lived in and for the hope of Crystal as men live in and for the hope of God. When we parted from each other, mingling our tears, she used always to say to me, 'Oh be *good!*' This adjuration doubtless resulted from her having so often heard what a rascal I was. Not that her love wavered. Perhaps she felt that somehow if I became better we would meet more often. But for me Crystal's little cry was and is the apotheosis of the word.

Religion, of a low evangelical variety, was everywhere at the orphanage. I detested that too. Crystal's 'Be good' (which had little or no effect on my conduct) meant more to me than Jesus Christ. Christ was always purveyed to me by people who clearly regarded me not only as a delinquent but as an object of pity. There is an attitude of complacent do-gooding condescension which even decent people cannot conceal and even a small child can recognize. Their religion seemed to me over-loud, over-simple, covertly threatening. There was nowhere in it to hide. We roared out 'choruses' about sin and redemption which reduced the hugest theological dogmas to the size of a parlour trick. I rejected the theology but was defenceless against the guilt which was so fruitlessly beaten into me. The mood was brisk and impatient. Either you were saved by the blood of the Lamb or else you were for it, black and white matter of breath-taking rewards or whipping. The efficacious Saviour almost figured

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