

August 8, 2022 Issue

A Duet

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August 1, 2022

Berners, like most schools, was held together by a hierarchy of privileges, infinitesimally graded and slowly bestowed over the years. It made the older boys conservative guardians of the existing order, jealous of the rights they had earned with such patience. Why bestow new-fashioned favors on the youngest when they themselves had tolerated privations to earn the perks of greater maturity? It was a long, hard course. The youngest, the first- and second-years, were the paupers and had nothing at all. Third formers were allowed long trousers and a tie with diagonal, rather than horizontal, stripes. The fourth-years had their own common room. The fifth exchanged their gray shirts for drip-dry white, which they scrubbed in the showers and draped on plastic hangers. They also had a superior blue tie.

Lights-out time advanced by fifteen minutes each year. To start, there was the dormitory shared by thirty boys. Five years later, that was down to six. The sixth form could wear sports jackets and overcoats of their own choice, though nothing colorful was tolerated. They also had a weekly allowance of a four-pound block of Cheddar cheese to be divided among a dozen boys, and several loaves, a toaster, and instant coffee, so they could entertain themselves between meals. They went to bed when they pleased. At the apex of the hierarchy were the prefects. They were entitled to take shortcuts across the grass and shout at anyone lower down the scale who dared to do the same.

Like any social order, it seemed to all but revolutionary spirits to be at one with the fabric of reality. Roland did not question it at the start of the academic year in September, 1962, when he and ten others in his house took possession of their fourth-form common room. After three years' service, this was their first significant step up the ladder. Roland, like his friends, was becoming naturalized. He had acquired the easy manner the school was noted for, with hints of the nuanced loutishness expected of the fourth-years. His accent was changing from his mother's rural Hampshire. Now there was a touch of Cockney, a smaller touch of BBC, and a third element that was difficult to define. Technocratic, perhaps.

Self-sure. He recognized it years later among jazz musicians. Not posh, and neither impressed by nor contemptuous of those who were.

In a dormitory shared with nine others, the expression of difficult feelings—self-doubt, tender hopes, sexual anxiety—was rare. As for sexual longing, that was submerged in boasts and taunts and extremely funny or completely obscure jokes. Whichever, it was obligatory to laugh. Behind this nervous sociability was the boys' awareness of a grand new terrain spread out before them. Prior to puberty, its existence had been hidden and had never troubled them. Now the idea of a sexual encounter rose on the horizon like a mountain range, beautiful, dangerous, irresistible. But still far away. As they talked and laughed in the dark after lights-out, there was a wild impatience in the air, a ridiculous longing for something unknown. Fulfillment lay ahead of them, they were cocksure of that, but they wanted it now. In a rural boarding school for boys, not much chance. How could they know what "it" really was when all their information came from implausible anecdotes and jokes? One night, a boy said into the darkness, during a lull, "What if you died before you had it?" There was silence in the dormitory as they took in this possibility. Then Roland said, "There's always the afterlife." And everybody laughed.

When the dormitory talk trailed away into the beginning of sleep, he retreated into his special place. The piano teacher, who no longer taught him, who had kissed him full on the lips when he was eleven, pinched his thigh once, unbuttoned his shorts to tidy his rumpled shirt, did not know she led a double life. There was the woman, the real one, Miss Miriam Cornell, the one who had invited him to lunch in her cottage when he was twelve. He had been too frightened of her to turn up. He saw her occasionally when he was near the sick bay, the stable block, or the music rooms. She would be alone, walking to or from her little red car, after or before a lesson. He never actually passed by her—he made sure of that. Then there was the woman of his daydreams, who did as he made her do, which was to deprive him of his will and make him do as she wished. He had to accept that she was now embedded in a special region of fantasy and longing, and that was where he wanted her to remain, trapped in his thoughts like the tamed unicorn behind its circular fence—the art master had shown the class a picture of the famous tapestry. The unicorn must never be free of its chain, never leave its tiny enclosure.

After three years of two hours a week with Mr. Clare, Roland was a promising pianist. He was working his way up the grades. After scraping through Grade 7, Roland was told by his teacher that he was “almost precocious” for a fourteen-year-old. Twice he had accompanied hymns on Sunday, when Neil Noake, by far the school’s best pianist, was down with a cold. Among his peers, Roland’s status hovered just above average. Being mediocre in sport and in class held him back. But he sometimes said something witty that was repeated about the place. And he had less acne than most.

The fourth-form common room had one table, eleven wooden chairs, some lockers, and a notice board. A further entitlement the boys had not expected appeared each day after lunch—a newspaper, sometimes the *Daily Express*, sometimes the *Daily Telegraph*. Discards from the staff common room. Roland came into the room one afternoon to see a friend sitting with his legs crossed, holding in front of him an open broadsheet, and he realized that they were grownups at last. Politics bored them, as they liked telling one another. As a group, they went for human interest, which was why they preferred the *Express*. A woman set on fire by her *hair dryer*. A madman with a knife shot dead by a farmer, who ended up in prison, to general disgust. A brothel unearthed not far from the Houses of Parliament. A zookeeper swallowed whole by a python. Adult life.

In that time, moral standards were high in public life and so, therefore, was hypocrisy. Delicious outrage was the general tone. Scandals became part of their sex education. The Profumo affair was less than a year away. Even the *Telegraph* carried photographs of smiling girls in the news with bouffant hair and eyelashes as thick and dark as prison bars.

Then, in late October, politics in the fourth-form common room became interesting. Unusually, the two newspapers arrived together on the table after lunch. Both were well thumbed, dog-eared, the newsprint softened by many hands, and both showed the same photograph on their front pages. For boys who had recently visited Lakenheath, the nearby U.S. Air Force base, on open day and had touched the cold steel nose of a missile, the way some might a holy relic, the story was compelling: spies, spy planes, secret cameras, deception, bombs, the two most powerful men on the planet ready to face each other down, and possible war. The photograph could have come from the triple-locked safe of an intelligence

mastermind. It showed low hills, square fields, wooded terrain scarred white by tracks and clearings. Narrow rectangular labels had helpful pointers: “20 long cylindrical tanks”; “missile transporters”; “5 missile dollies”; “12 prob guideline missiles.” Flying their U2 reconnaissance jets at impossible heights, using cameras with exciting telescopic power, the Americans had revealed to the world Russian nuclear missiles on Cuba, only ninety miles from the Florida coast. Intolerable, everyone agreed. A gun to the head of the West. The sites would have to be bombed before they became operational, then the island invaded.

What might the Russians do? Even as the boys of the fourth-form common room affected genuine grown-up concern at this new state of things, the words “thermonuclear warhead” conjured for them, like towering thunderclouds at sunset, a thrilling reckless disruption, a promise of ultimate liberty by which school, routines, regulations, even parents—everything—was to be blown away, a world wiped clean. A boundless adventure was at hand. They knew they would survive; they discussed rucksacks, water bottles, penknives, maps. Roland was by then a member of the photography club and knew how to develop and print. He had clocked some hours in the darkroom working on multiple versions of a view across the river, with oak trees and ferns, six inches by four, rather fine except for an annoying brown streak across the center that he had failed to eliminate. He was listened to with respect as he examined the fresh U2 photo that appeared on the second day. This one had new labels: “erector/launcher equipment”; “8 missile trailers”; “tent areas.” Someone passed him a magnifying glass. He leaned in closer. When he discovered the mouth of a tunnel that the C.I.A. analysts had missed, he was believed. One by one, his classmates looked and saw it, too. Others had important theories of their own of what should be done, and what must happen when it was.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Classes went on as usual. No teacher referred to the crisis, and the boys were not surprised. These were separate realms, school and the real world. James Hern, the stern but privately kind housemaster, did not mention in his evening announcements that the world might soon be ending. The somewhat put-upon matron, Mrs. Maldey, did not speak of the Cuban missile crisis when the boys

handed in their laundry, and she was usually irritated by any threat to her complex routines. Roland did not write about the situation in his next letter to his mother. President Kennedy had announced a “quarantine” around Cuba; Russian vessels, with a cargo of nuclear warheads, were heading toward a flotilla of American warships. If Khrushchev did not order his ships back they would be sunk, and the Third World War could begin. How could that make sense alongside Roland’s account of planting nursery fir trees with the Young Farmers Club on boggy land behind the dormitory? Their letters crossed, and hers were as innocent as his. The boys had no access to TV—that was for the sixth form only on certain days. No one listened to or knew about serious radio news. There were some breezy announcements on Radio Luxembourg, but essentially the Cuban missile affair was a drama confined to the two newspapers.

The first rush of boyish excitement began to fade. The official school silence was making Roland anxious. He was most affected when alone. A moody stroll through the oaks and bracken beyond the ha-ha didn’t help. For an hour he sat at the foot of the statue of Diana the Huntress, looking toward the river. He might never see his parents again, or his sister Susan. Or get to know his brother Henry better. One evening, after lights-out, the boys were discussing the crisis as they did every night. The door opened and a prefect came in. It was the Head of House. He didn’t tell them to quiet down. Instead, he joined their conversation. They began to ask him questions, which he answered gravely, as if he himself were just back from the Crisis Room in the White House. He claimed insider knowledge, and they believed everything he said and were flattered to have him to themselves. He was already a full member of the adult world, and their bridge to it. Three years ago, he had been one of them. They couldn’t see him in the darkness, only hear his low certain tone coming from the direction of the door, that school voice of softened Cockney touched with bookish confidence. He told them something startling, which they should have worked out for themselves. In an all-out nuclear war, he said, one of the important targets in England would be the Lakenheath airbase, less than fifty miles away. That meant that the school would be instantly obliterated, Suffolk would become a desert, and all the people in it would be—and this was the word he used—vaporized. *Vaporized*. Several boys echoed the word from their beds.

The prefect left, and the talk slowed and stumbled into the night as sleep took hold. Roland remained awake. The word would not let him sleep. It made sense. Mr.

Corner, the biology teacher, had told the class not so long ago that the human body was ninety-three per cent water. Boiled away in a white flash, the remaining seven per cent coiling in the air like cigarette smoke, dispersed on the breeze. Or whipped away by the bomb's blast. There would be no heading north with his best friends, rucksacks loaded with survival rations, fleeing like Daniel Defoe's citizens escaping London in the plague year. Roland had not believed in the survival adventure, anyway. But it had kept him from dwelling on what might really happen.

He had never contemplated his own death. He was certain that the usual associations—dark, cold, silent, decay—were irrelevant. These were all things that could be felt and understood. Death lay on the far side of darkness, beyond even nothing. He was dismissive of the afterlife, like all of his friends. They sat through the compulsory Sunday-evening service in contempt of the earnest visiting vicars and their wheedling and beseeching of a nonexistent God. It was a point of honor with them never to utter the responses or close their eyes, bow heads or say "Amen" or sing the hymns, although they stood and opened the hymnal at a random page out of a residual sense of courtesy. At fourteen, they were newly launched on a splendid truculent revolt. It was liberating to be or feel loutish. Satire, parody, mockery were their modes, ludicrous renderings of authority's voice and stock phrases. They were scathing, merciless with one another, too, even as they were loyal. All of this, all of them, soon to be vaporized. He did not see how the Russians could afford to back down when the whole world was watching. The two sides, protesting that they stood for peace, would, for pride and honor's sake, stumble into war. One small exchange, one ship sunk for another, would become a lunatic conflagration. Schoolboys knew that this was how the First World War had begun. They had written essays on the subject. Each country had said it didn't want war, and then each had joined in with a ferocity the world was still trying to understand. This time there would be no one left to try. Then what of that first sexual encounter, that beautiful dangerous mountain range? Blown away with the rest. As Roland lay waiting for sleep, he remembered his friend's question: What if you died before you had it? *It*.

The next day, Saturday, 27th October, was the beginning of half-term. No Saturday lessons, no games, was the extent of it. School would resume on Monday. Some of the London boys had parents coming down. A sixth former had a copy of

the *Guardian* and let Roland look. In the Caribbean, the Americans had allowed a Russian oil tanker bound for Cuba to pass. It was assumed that it contained only oil. The Russian ships carrying missiles brazenly strapped to their decks had slowed or stopped. But Russian submarines were reported in the area and new reconnaissance photos showed that work was continuing on the Cuban sites. The missiles were ready for firing. There was a buildup of American military forces in Florida, at Key West. It looked likely that the plan was to invade Cuba and destroy the sites. A French politician was quoted as saying that the world was “teetering” on the brink of nuclear war. Soon it would be too late to turn back.

Roland’s bike was on a raised pavement behind the school kitchens, a rusty old racer with twenty-one gears and a slow leak in the front tire that he could never be bothered to fix. The day was warm and almost cloudless. Clear enough to watch missiles sailing in from the east. He came down the slope toward the church at speed, holding his breath against the smell of warmed pig swill from the sty, and at the Berners School lodge turned left toward Shotley. After a mile, he was looking out for his shortcut, a farm track on his right that would take him across flat fields, past Crouch House, along Warren Lane to the duck pond and Erwarnton Hall. Every boy at school knew that Anne Boleyn had been happy there, visiting as a child, and that the future King Henry had come to court her. Before she was beheaded in the Tower of London at his command, she asked for her heart to be entombed in Erwarnton church. It was said to be in a little heart-shaped box buried underneath the organ.

At the hall, Roland stopped, propped his bike by the ancient gatehouse, crossed the road, and walked up and down. Her house was only minutes away. He wasn’t ready. It was important not to arrive sweaty and out of breath. He had spent so much time thinking about and avoiding Erwarnton that he felt as if he, too, had spent his childhood here. Minutes later, he was passing a pub and some scattered houses and soon after he was outside her cottage. He knew it by her red car parked on the grass. There was a white picket gate and a brick path that led with a slight curve to her front door. He leaned his bike against the car, pulled his trousers free of his socks, and hesitated. He felt watched, though there was no movement at the two downstairs windows. Unlike the other cottages around, this one had no net

curtains. He would have preferred her to come out to him. Greet him and do all the talking.

After a moment, he pushed open the gate and went slowly toward the door. The borders that ran along the path had the ruined look of a forgotten summer. She hadn't yet dug out the dying plants. He was surprised to see old plastic flowerpots on their side and sweet wrappers trodden into the dead leaves. She had always seemed a neat and organized person, but he knew nothing about her. He was making a mistake and should turn back now, before she saw him. No, he was determined to tie himself to his fate. His hand was already lifting the heavy knocker and letting it fall. And again. He heard rapid muffled thumps as she descended the stairs. There was the sound of a bolt withdrawn. She pulled the door open so fast and wide that he was instantly intimidated and couldn't meet her gaze. The first thing he saw was that she was barefoot and her toenails were painted purple.

"It's you." She said it neutrally, without hesitation or surprise. He lifted his head and they exchanged a glance, and for a confused moment he thought he might have knocked at the wrong house. Sure, she recognized him. But she looked different. Her hair was loose, almost to her shoulders. She wore a pale-green T-shirt under a cardigan, and jeans that ended well above her ankles. Her Saturday clothes. He had prepared something to say, an opening, but he had forgotten it.

"Almost two years late. Lunch is cold."

He said it quickly. "I had a long detention."

She smiled, and he blushed with helpless pride in his smart reply. It had come from nowhere.

"Come on, then."

He stepped past her into a cramped hallway, with a steep run of stairs in front of him and doors to the left and right.

"Go left."

He saw the piano first, a baby grand squashed into a corner but still taking up a good part of the room. Piles of music on two chairs, two small sofas facing each other over a low table, stacked with books. Today's newspapers were on the floor. Beyond, a door through to a tiny kitchen that gave onto a walled garden.

“Sit,” she said, as if to a dog. A joke, of course. She sat opposite and looked at him intently, seeming vaguely amused by his presence. What did she see?

In later years, he often wondered. A fourteen-year-old boy, average height for his age, slender build but strong enough, dark-brown hair, long for the times thanks to the distant influence of John Mayall and, later, Eric Clapton. During a brief stay with his sister, Roland had been taken by his cousin Barry to the Ricky Tick Club at Guildford bus station to hear the Rolling Stones. It was there that Roland's look had been consolidated, for he was impressed by the black jeans that Brian Jones wore. What other changes might Miss Cornell have noted? Voice newly broken. Long, solemn face, full lips that sometimes trembled, as though he were suppressing certain thoughts, greenish-brown eyes behind National Health Service specs, whose plastic rims he had prised off long before John Lennon thought of doing the same. Gray Harris Tweed jacket with elbow patches over a Hawaiian shirt with palm-tree motif. Drainpipe gray flannel trousers were the closest substitute for tight black jeans that the Berners dress code would permit. His Winklepicker shoes had a medieval look. He smelled of a lemony cologne. That day he was free of acne. There was something indefinably unwholesome about him. Something lean and snakelike.

Where he sprawled back uneasily on the sofa, she was upright, and now she leaned forward. Her voice was sweet and tolerant. Perhaps she pitied him. “So, Roland. Tell me about yourself.”

It was one of those adult questions, impossible and dull. As he politely pushed himself up into a position more like hers, he could think of nothing to talk about other than his piano lessons with Mr. Clare. He explained that he was getting an extra hour and a half a week for free. Lately, he told her, he had been learning—

She interrupted him, and, as she did so, she pulled up her right leg and tucked it under her left knee. “I hear you got your Grade 7.”

“Yep.”

“Merlin Clare says your sight-reading is good.”

“I don’t know.”

“And you’ve come all this way on your bike to play duets with me.”

He blushed again, this time at what he thought was innuendo. He also experienced the beginnings of an erection. He moved a hand across his lap in case it was visible. But she was on her feet and going toward the piano.

“I’ve got just the thing. Mozart.”

She was already sitting at the piano, and he was still on the sofa in a daze of embarrassment. He was about to fail and be humiliated. And sent away.

“Ready?”

“I don’t really feel like it.”

“Just the first movement. It’ll do you no harm.”

He could see no way out. He rose slowly, then squeezed behind her to take the left side. As he passed, he felt the warmth coming off the back of her head. When he was sitting down, he became aware of a ticking clock above the fireplace, as loud as a metronome. Against it, keeping time in a duet would be a challenge. Against both would be his agitated heart. She arranged the music before them. D major. A Mozart four-hander. He had played some of it once with Neil Noake, perhaps six months before. Suddenly, she had a change of mind.

“We’ll swap. More fun for you.”

She stood and stepped away, and he slid along to his right. As she sat down again, she said in that same kindly voice, “We won’t take it too fast.”

With a slight tilt of her whole body, and raising both hands above the keyboard and dropping them, she brought them in, and off they went at what seemed to Roland a

hopeless pace. Like tobogganing down an icy mountain. He was a fraction behind her on the opening grand declaration, so that the piano, a Steinway, sounded like a barroom honky-tonk. In his nervousness he gave a snort of smothered laughter. He caught up with her, and then, too earnest, he was slightly ahead. He was clinging to a cliff edge. Expression, dynamics were beyond him—he could do no more than play the right notes in the right order as they careened across the page. There were moments when it sounded almost good. As they tossed back and forth a little figure in an extended throbbing crescendo, she called out “Bravo!” What a din they were making in the tiny room. When they reached the end of the movement, she flipped the page over. “Can’t stop now!”

He managed well enough, picking his way through the lilting melody while she played a gentle Alberti bass that bore him along. She pressed against him, leaning to her right as they lifted into a higher register together. He relaxed a little when she almost fumbled a run of notes, a private game of mischievous Mozart. But the movement seemed to last hours, and at the end the black dots that signalled a repeat were a punishment, a renewed jail sentence. The weight on his attention was becoming unbearable. His eyes were smarting. Finally, the movement sank away into its final chord, which he held for a crotchet too long.

Immediately, she stood. He felt close to tears with relief that they were not going to play the allegro molto. But she hadn’t spoken, and he sensed that he had disappointed her. She was close behind him. She put her hands on his shoulders, leaned down, and whispered in his ear, “You’re going to be all right.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant. She crossed the room and went into the kitchen. Seeing her bare white feet, hearing the scuffing sound they produced on the flagstones, made him feel weak. A couple of minutes later, she came back with glasses of orange juice, made from actual crushed oranges, a novel taste. By then, he was standing uncertainly by the low table, wondering if he was now expected to leave. He would not have minded. They drank in silence. Then she put her glass down and did something that almost caused him to faint. He had to steady himself against the arm of a sofa. She went to the front door, knelt, and sank the heavy door bolt into the stone floor. Then she came back and took his hand.

“Come on, then.”

She led him to the foot of the stairs, where she paused and looked at him intently. Her eyes were bright.

“Are you frightened?”

“No,” he lied. His voice was thick. He needed to clear his throat, but he didn’t dare do it in case it made him sound weak or stupid or unhealthy. In case it woke him from this dream. The staircase was narrow. He held on to her hand as she went before him and towed him up. On the landing, there was a bathroom straight ahead and, as downstairs, doors to the right and left. She pulled him to the right. The room excited him. It was a mess. The bed was unmade. On the floor by a laundry basket was a small heap of her underwear in various pastels. The sight of it touched him. When he knocked, she must have been folding her washing for the week ahead, the way people did on Saturday mornings.

“Take your shoes and socks off.”

He did as he was told. He did not like the way his pointed shoes rose up at the tips. He pushed them under a chair.

She spoke in a sensible voice. “Are you circumcised, Roland?”

“Yes. I mean, no.”

“Either way, you’ll go in the bathroom and have a good wash.”

It seemed reasonable enough and, because of that, his arousal drained away. The bathroom was tiny, with a pink bathmat, a narrow bath, and a glass-fronted shower cubicle at a slight lean, and, on a chrome rack, thick white towels of a kind that reminded him of home. On a shelf above the basin he saw a curvy bottle of her perfume and its name, rosewater. He was thorough in his preparations. Displeasing her in any way was what he dreaded most. As he was getting dressed, he peered out a small leaded window under the gable. He had a view across wide fields to the Stour, nearing low tide, with its mudbanks emerging from the silver water like the humped backs of monsters, and sea grasses and circling flocks of seabirds. A twin-masted sailboat was in mid-channel running out with the flow. Whatever was

happening here in this cottage, the world would go on, anyway. Until it didn't. Perhaps within the hour.

When he returned, she had tidied the room and turned back the covers. "That's what you'll do every time."

Her suggestion of a future excited him again. She gestured to him to sit beside her on the bed. Then she put her hand on his knee.

"Are you worried about contraception?"

He did not answer. He hadn't given it a thought and was ignorant of the details.

She said, "I could be the first woman on the Shotley Peninsula to be on the pill."

This, too, was beyond him. His only resource was the truth, what was most obvious at that moment. He turned to face her and said, "I really like being here with you." As the words left him, they sounded childish. But she smiled and drew his face to hers and they kissed. Not for very long or very deeply. He followed her. Lips then, glancingly, tips of tongues, then just lips again. She lay back on the bed against the pillows and said, "Get undressed for me. I want to look at you."

He stood and pulled his Hawaiian shirt over his head. The old oak floorboards creaked under him when he stood on one leg to pull off his trousers. Tapered by his mother to keep him in fashion, they were tight over the heels. He was in good shape, he thought, and not ashamed to stand exposed in front of Miriam Cornell.

But she said sharply, "All of it."

So he pulled down his underpants and stepped out of them.

"That's better. Lovely, Roland. And look at you."

She was right. He had never known such anticipation. Even as she frightened him, he trusted her and was ready to do whatever she asked. All the time he had spent with her in his thoughts and, before that, all the intimidating lessons at the piano had been a rehearsal for what was about to happen. It was all one lesson. She

would make him ready to face death, happy to be vaporized. He looked at her expectantly. What did he see?

The memory would never leave him. The bed was a double by the standards of the time, less than five feet across. Two sets of two pillows. She sat against one set with her knees drawn up. While he was undressing, she had taken off her cardigan and jeans. Her knickers, like her T-shirt, were green. Cotton, not silk. The T-shirt was a large man's size, and perhaps he should have worried about a rival. The folds of the material, brushed cotton, seemed to him voluptuous in his heightened state. Her eyes were also green. He had once thought there was something cruel about them. Now their color suggested daring. She could do anything she wanted. Her bare legs had traces of a summer tan. Her round face, which once had the quality of a mask, now had a soft and open look. The light through the small bedroom window picked out the strength of her cheekbones. No lipstick this Saturday morning. The hair she had worn in a bun for lessons was very fine and strands of it floated up when she moved her head. She was looking at him in that patient, wry way she had. Something about him amused her. She pulled her T-shirt off and let it fall to the floor.

“Time you learned to take a girl's bra off.”

He knelt beside her on the bed. Though his fingers shook, it turned out to be obvious enough, how to lift the hooks from the eyes. She pushed the blankets and sheets away. She was holding his gaze, as if to prevent him from gaping at her breasts.

“Let's get in,” she said. “Come here.”

She lay on her back with her arm stretched out. She wanted him to lie on it, or within it. With her free hand she pulled up the covers, turned on her side and drew him toward her. He was uneasy. This was more like a mother-and-child embrace. He sensed that he should be in a more commanding position. He felt strongly that he shouldn't let himself be babied. But how strongly? To be enveloped like this was sudden, unexpected bliss. There was no choice. She drew his face toward her breasts and now they filled his view and he took her nipple in his mouth. She shuddered and murmured, “Oh, God.” He came up for air. They were face to face

and kissing. She guided his fingers between her legs and showed him, then took her hand away. She whispered, “No, gently, slower,” and closed her eyes.

Suddenly, she pushed the bed covers away and rolled on top of him, sat up—and it was complete, accomplished. So simple. Like some trick with a vanishing knot in a length of soft rope. He lay back in sensual wonder, reaching for her hands, unable to speak. Probably only minutes passed. It seemed as if he had been shown a hidden fold in space where there was a catch, a fastener, and that as he released it and peeled away the illusory everyday he saw what had always been there. Their roles—teacher, pupil—the order and self-importance of school, timetables, bikes, cars, clothes, even words: all of it a diversion to keep everyone from this. It was either hilarious or it was tragic that people should go about their daily business in the conventional way when they knew there was this. Even the headmaster, who had a son and a daughter, must know. Even the Queen. Every adult knew. What a façade. What pretense.

Later, she opened her eyes and, gazing down at him with a faraway look, said, “There’s something missing.”

His voice came faintly from beyond the cottage walls, “Yes?”

“You haven’t said my name.”

“Miriam.”

“Say it three times.”

He did so.

A pause. She swayed, then she said, “Say something to me. With my name.”

He did not hesitate. It was a love letter, and he meant it. “Dear Miriam, I love Miriam. I love you, Miriam.” And as he was saying it again she arched her back, gave a shout, a beautiful tapering cry. That was it for him, too. He followed her, just one step behind, barely a crotchet.

He went downstairs ten minutes after her. His head was clear, his tread was light, and he took the steep stairs two at a time. The clocks had not yet been turned back and the sun was still high enough. It was not even one-thirty. It would be a delight now to be on his bike, taking a different route to school, the Harkstead way, at speed, passing close by the pine wood that contained the secret lake. Alone, to prize the treasure that no one could take from him, to taste it, sift it, reconstruct it. To get the measure of the new person he was. He might extend the ride, take the farm tracks to Freston. The prospect was sweet. But, first, a goodbye. When he arrived in the sitting room, she was bending down to gather up the papers from the floor. He was not too young to sense a shift of mood. Her movements were quick and tense. Her hair was tied back tight. She straightened and looked at him and knew.

She said, "Oh, no, you don't."

"What?"

She came toward him. "You absolutely don't."

He started to say, "I don't know what you mean," but she spoke over him. "Got what you came for and heading off. Is that it?"

"No. Honestly. I want to stay."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes!"

"Yes, Miss."

He looked to see if she was making fun of him. Impossible to tell.

"Yes, Miss."

"Good. Ever peeled a potato?"

He nodded, not daring to say no.

She led him into the kitchen. By the sink, in a tin bowl, were five big dirty potatoes. She gave him a peeler and a colander. “Did you wash your hands?”

He tried to sound curt. “Yes.”

“Yes, Miss.”

“I thought you wanted me to call you Miriam.”

She gave him a look of exaggerated pity and continued. “When they’re done and rinsed, chop them into four and put them in that pot.”

She stepped into some clogs and went into the back garden, and he started work. He felt trapped, bewildered, and at the same time he thought he owed her a great debt. Of course, it would have been wrong, appalling bad manners, to leave. But even if it had been right he would not have known how to withstand her. She had always frightened him. He had not forgotten how cruel she could be. Now it was more complicated; it was worse, and he had made it worse. He suspected that he had brushed against a fundamental law of the universe: such ecstasy must compromise his freedom. That was its price.

The first potato was slow. Like wood carving, at which he had always been useless. By the fourth, he thought he had the hang of it. The trick was to ignore the detail. He quartered and rinsed his five potatoes and put them in the pot of water. He went to the kitchen’s half-glazed door to see what she was up to. The light was golden. She was dragging a cast-iron table across the lawn toward a shed. Pausing, then dragging a few inches at a time. Her movements were frantic, even angry. The terrible thought came to him that there might be something wrong with her. She saw him and waved at him to come out.

When he got to her, she said, “Don’t just watch. This thing is bloody heavy.”

Together, they stored the table in the shed. Then she put a rake in his hands and told him to sweep up the leaves and put them on the compost heap at the bottom of the garden. While he raked beech leaves from next door’s tree, she was busy in the borders with her secateurs. An hour passed. He was dumping the last of the leaves on the compost. Across the open space, he could make out a slice of the river, part

of an inlet, tinted orange. It occurred to him to step over the low fence into the field, walk around to the front of the cottage, retrieve his bike, and be off. Never come back. It would hardly matter if the world was ending. He could do all that. But it was simple—he couldn't. His urge to leave surprised him as much as his inability to. It was a matter of courtesy to help out, to stay for lunch. He was hungry; the leg of lamb he had seen in the kitchen would be far superior to anything at school. It helped, or simplified matters, minutes later, when Miriam told him to rake the front garden also. He had no choice. As he turned to obey, she pulled him back by the collar of his shirt and kissed him on the cheek.

She went indoors to prepare lunch while he pushed a wheelbarrow with his rake around the house and set to work out front. It was harder here. The leaves were massed between and behind thorny rose shrubs along the borders. The rake's head was too wide. He had to go down on all fours and scoop the leaves out with his hands. He gathered up the empty plastic flowerpots, the sweet wrappers, and other rubbish that had blown in. Just beyond her front gate was her car and his bike leaning against it. He tried not to look at it. Perhaps it was hunger that was making him irritable. That and the fiddly nature of the job.

When he was done at last and had returned the rake and the wheelbarrow to the shed, he went indoors. Miriam was basting the lamb.

“Not ready yet,” she said, and then she saw him. “Look at the state of you. Your trousers are filthy.” She took his hand. “You're all scratched. You poor darling. Get your shoes off. Into the shower with you!”

He let himself be led upstairs. The backs of his hands were indeed bloody from the rose thorns. He felt cared for and just a little heroic. In her bedroom, he undressed in front of her.

Her tone was warm. “Look at you. Big again.” She drew him toward her and fondled him while they kissed.

The shower was not a good experience. The water came out in a dribble, with a hair's-breadth turn of the tap between icy and scalding. When he returned to the bedroom, towel round his waist, his clothes were gone. He heard her coming up the stairs.

Before he could ask, she said, “They’re in the washing machine. You can’t go back to school covered in mud.” She passed him a gray sweater and a pair of her beige slacks. “Don’t worry. I’m not lending you my knickers.”

Her clothes fit well enough, though the slacks looked girlish around the hips. There was an odd little loop that was supposed to go under his heel. He let it drag. As he followed her down the stairs, the thought that they were both barefoot pleased him. At their very late lunch she had a glass of white wine, which she said she preferred at room temperature. He did not know the rules of wine, but he nodded. She poured him some homemade lemonade. At first, they ate in silence, and he was nervous, for he was beginning to understand how quickly her moods shifted. It was also worrying that he was without his clothes. The washing machine was turning, making little moaning sounds. But soon he did not care, because he had a plate of roast lamb, pink, even bloody in places, which was new to him. And seven large pieces of roast potato and much buttery cauliflower. When it was offered, he accepted another plate of meat and then a third and a total of fifteen potato chunks and most of the cauliflower. He would have liked to pick up the half-full gravy boat and drink it all, because it was surely going to be thrown away. But he knew his manners.

Finally, she raised the subject, the only real topic. Since it had been the cause of his visit, he had automatically assumed the matter buried.

“I don’t suppose you read the papers.”

“I do,” he said quickly. “I know what’s happening.”

“And what do you think?”

He considered carefully. He was so full of food, and he was also a new person—a man, in fact—and at that moment he was not really bothered. But he said, “We might all be dead tomorrow. Or tonight.”

She pushed her plate aside and folded her arms. “Really? You don’t look very scared.”

His present indifference was a heavy weight. He forced himself to remember how he had felt the day before, and the night before that. “I’m terrified.” And then, suddenly feeling the rich aura of his new maturity, he returned her question, in a manner that would never have occurred to a child. “What do *you* think?”

“I think Kennedy and all of America are behaving like spoiled babies. Stupid and reckless. And the Russians are liars and thugs. You’re quite right to be frightened.”

Roland was astonished. He had never heard a word against the Americans. The President was a godly figure in everything Roland had read. “But it was the Russians who put their missiles—”

Cartoon by Matt Reuter

“Yes, yes. And the Americans have theirs right against the Soviet border with Turkey. They’ve always said that strategic balance was the only way to keep the world safe. They should both pull back. Instead, we have these silly dangerous games at sea. Boys’ games!”

Her passion astonished him. Her cheeks were red. His heart was racing. He had never felt so grown-up. “Then what’s going to happen?”

“Either some trigger-happy idiot out at sea makes a mistake and it all blows up, just like you fear. Or they do the deal they should have done ten days ago, like proper statesmen, instead of driving us all to the brink.”

“So you think a war might really happen?”

“It’s just possible, yes.”

He stared at her. His own position, that they might all die tonight, was largely rhetorical. It was what his friends and the sixth formers said at school. There was comfort in having everybody say it. But hearing it now from her was a shock. She seemed wise. The newspapers were saying the same kind of thing, but that mattered less. Those were stories, like entertainments. He began to feel shivery.

She placed a hand on his wrist, turned it, and found his fingers and interlocked them with hers. “Listen, Roland. It’s very, very unlikely. They might be stupid, but both sides have too much to lose. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what I’d like?” She waited for his answer.

“What?”

“I’d like to take you upstairs with me.” She added in a whisper, “Make you feel safe.”

So they rose without letting go, and for the third time that day she towed him up the stairs. In the fading light of the late afternoon it happened all over again, and again he wondered at himself, how earlier in the day he had been so eager to get away, to regress and become a kid on a bike. Afterward, he lay on her arm, his face level with her breasts, feeling a growing drowsiness begin to smother him. His attention drifted in and out of what she was quietly saying.

“I always knew that you’d come. . . . I’ve been very patient, but I knew . . . even though you didn’t. Are you listening? Good. Because now that you’re here you should know. I’ve waited a very long time. You’re not to speak about this to anyone. Not to your closest friend, no boasting about it, however tempting it is. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s clear.”

When he woke it was dark outside and she had gone. The bedroom air was cold on his nose and ears. He lay on his back in the comfortable bed. From downstairs he heard the front door open and close and then a familiar ticking sound that he could not place. He lay for half an hour in loosely associated daydreams. If the world did not end, then the school term would, in fifty-four days. He would make the journey to his father’s latest Army posting, in Germany, to be with his parents for the Christmas holidays, a prospect of comfort and boredom. What he liked was to think about the stages of the journey, the train from Ipswich to Manningtree, where the River Stour ceased to be tidal, change there for Harwich to get the night boat to

the Hook of Holland, walk across the railway lines on the quayside and climb up onto the train to Hanover, at all stages checking the inside pocket of his school blazer to make sure his passport was still there.

He dressed quickly in the clothes she had lent him and went downstairs. The first thing he saw was his bike propped against the piano. She was in the kitchen, finishing the washing-up.

She called to him. “Safer in here. I spoke to Paul Bond. Did you know I teach his daughter? It’s fine for you to stay overnight.” She came toward him and kissed his forehead.

She was wearing a blue dress of fine corduroy, with darker blue buttons down the front. He liked her familiar perfume. Now it seemed that for the first time he really understood how beautiful she was.

“I told him we’re rehearsing a duet. And we are.”

He wheeled his bike through the kitchen into the garden and propped it by the shed. It was a night of stars and the first touch of winter. Already the beginning of a frost was forming on the lawn that he had raked. It crunched underfoot as he moved away from the kitchen light in order to see the smudged forked road of the Milky Way. A Third World War would make no difference to the universe.

Miriam called to him from the kitchen door. “Roland, you’ll freeze to death. Get inside.”

He went immediately toward her.

That evening they played the Mozart again, and this time he was more expressive and followed the dynamic markings. In the slow movement, he tried to imitate her smooth and seamless legato touch. He thundered his way through the allegro molto and the cottage seemed to shake. It hardly mattered. They laughed about it. At the end, she hugged him.

The next morning, he slept late. By the time he came downstairs, it was even late for lunch. Miriam was in the kitchen preparing eggs. The pages of the Sunday paper, the *Observer*, were spread across an armchair and the floor. There was no

change; the crisis continued. The headline was clear—“KENNEDY: NO DEAL TILL CUBA MISSILES ARE MADE USELESS.” She gave him a glass of orange juice and made him play another Mozart duet with her, this time the F major. He sight-read all the way. Afterward, she said, “You play the dotted notes like a jazz musician.” It was a rebuke he took as praise.

When, at last, they sat down to eat and she turned on the radio for the news, the story had moved on. The crisis was over. They listened to a deep voice, rich in authority, issue the deliverance. There had been an important exchange of letters between the leaders. The Russian ships were turning back, and Khrushchev would order that the missiles be removed from Cuba. The general view was that President Kennedy had saved the world. The Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, had phoned his congratulations.

It was another cloudless day. The low afternoon sun, well past the equinox, blazed through the glazed upper half of the kitchen door into the little sitting room and spilled across the table. As Roland ate his omelette, he felt again the insidious desire to be off, hurtling along the route he had in mind. Out of the question. He had already been told that while she ironed his clothes he would be washing the dishes. She had earned the right to tell him what to do. But she'd had it from the beginning.

“What a relief,” she kept saying. “Aren't you happy? You don't look it.”

“I am, honestly. It's amazing. What a relief.”

Thirty years later, he would understand the damage, how derailed his life was by her, how distorted his expectation of love. When he was twelve, she had touched and unwound a little coil in his being and, without having to do more, she had possessed him. Two years later, pursued by fear and childish vanity and incoherent desire, he had run to her. It would take him half a lifetime to frame it in such simple terms. But now, here at the sunlit lunch table, many layers below his outward decorum, and barely available to the ignorant boy, was a mere suspicion that he had been cheated of something. The world would go on, he would remain unvaporized. He needn't have done a thing. ♦

This is drawn from “Lessons.”

Published in the print edition of the August 8, 2022, issue.

Ian McEwan is the author of thirteen novels and three short-story collections. He will publish his seventeenth novel, "Lessons," in September.