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FIRST LOVE,



Last Rites

IAN MCEWAN



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE LONDON

Conversation With a Cupboard Man



You ask me what I did when I saw this girl. Well, I'll tell you. You see that cupboard there, it takes up most of the room. I ran all the way back here, climbed inside and tossed myself off. Don't think I thought about the girl while I did it. No, I couldn't bear that. I went back in my mind till I was three feet high. That made it come quicker. I can see you think I'm dirty and bent. Well, I washed my hands afterwards, which is more than some people. And I felt better too. Do you see what I mean, I unwound. The way things have been up here in this room what else is there? It's all right for you. I bet you live in a clean house and your wife washes the sheets and the government pays you to find out about people. All right, I know you're a ... what is it? ... a social worker and you're trying to help, but you can do me no good except by listening. I won't change now, I've been me too long. But it's good to talk so I'll just tell you about myself.

I never saw my father because he died before I was born. I think problems started right there – it was my mother who brought me up and no one else. We lived in a huge house near Staines. She was twisted up, you know, that's where I got it from. All she wanted was to have children

but she wouldn't think of getting married again so that left only me; I had to be all the children she had ever wanted. She tried to stop me growing up and for a long time she succeeded. Do you know, I didn't learn to speak properly till I was eighteen. I got no schooling, she kept me home because she said it was a rough area. She had her arms round me day and night. She didn't like it when I got too big for my cot so she went out and bought a crib bed from a hospital auction. That was the sort of thing she would do. Right up until I left I was still sleeping in that thing. I couldn't go to sleep in an ordinary bed, I thought I was going to fall out and I could never get to sleep. When I was two inches taller than her she was still trying to tie a bib round my neck. She was insane. She got a hammer and nails and some pieces of wood and tried to make a kind of high chair for me to sit in, and that was when I was fourteen. Well, you can imagine, the thing just fell to bits as soon as I sat in it. But Christ! The mush she used to feed me on. That's why I get these stomach troubles. She wouldn't let me do anything for myself, even tried to stop me from being clean. I could hardly move without her, and she loved it, the bitch.

Why didn't I run off then when I was older? You might think there was nothing to stop me. But listen, it never occurred to me. I didn't know any other life, I didn't think I was different. Anyway, how could I run away when I would be shitting myself with terror before I got fifty yards down the street? And where'd I go? I could hardly tie my own shoelaces, let alone get a job. Do I sound bitter about it now? I'll tell you a funny thing. I wasn't unhappy, you know. She was all right really. She used to read me stories and that, and we used to make things out of cardboard. We had a kind of theatre we made ourselves out of a fruit box, and we made the people out of paper

and card. No, I wasn't unhappy till I found out what other people thought about me. I suppose I could have spent the whole of my life living my first two years over and over again and still not think I was unhappy. She was a good woman really, my mother. Just twisted, that's all.

How did I become an adult? I'll tell you, I never did learn. I have to pretend. All the things you take for granted I have to do it all consciously. I'm always thinking about it, like I was on the stage. I'm sitting in this chair with my arms folded, that's all right, but I'd rather be lying on the floor gurgling to myself than be talking to you. I can see you think I'm joking. It still takes me a long time to get dressed in the morning, and lately I haven't bothered anyway. And you've seen how clumsy I am with a knife and fork. I'd rather someone came and patted me on the back and fed me with a spoon. Do you believe me? Do you think it's disgusting? Well, I do. It's the most disgusting thing I know. That's why I spit on the memory of my mother because she made me this way.

I'll tell you how I came to learn to pretend to be an adult. When I was seventeen my mother was just thirty-eight. She was still an attractive woman and looked much younger. If it wasn't for her obsession with me she could have got married as easy as that. But she was too busy trying to push me back up her womb to think of things like that. That was until she met this bloke, and then it all changed, just like that. Overnight she just swapped obsessions and all the sex she'd missed out on caught up with her. She went mad for this fellow, as if she wasn't mad enough already. She wanted to bring him home but she didn't dare in case he saw me, a seventeen-year-old baby. That's why in two months I had a lifetime's growing up to do. She started hitting me when I spilt food or pronounced

words wrongly or even when I was just standing there watching her doing something. And then she started going out in the evenings, leaving me alone in the house. This intensive training really threw me. To have someone all over you for seventeen years and then find yourself at war. I started getting these headaches. And then the fits, especially when she was getting ready to go out in the evenings. My arms and legs would go right out of control, my tongue did things by itself as if it belonged to someone else. It was a nightmare. Then everything went as black as hell. When I came round my mother would have gone out anyway and I'd be lying there in my own shit in that dark house. It was a bad time.

I think the fits became less frequent because one day she brought her man home. I was fairly presentable by that time. My mother passed me off as mentally subnormal, which I suppose I was. I can't remember much about the bloke except that he was very large with long hair greased back. He always wore blue suits. He owned a garage in Clapham and because he was big and successful he hated me at first sight. You can imagine how I looked then, I had hardly been out of the house in my life. I was thin and bloodless, even thinner and weaker than I am now. I hated him too because he had taken my mother. First time he just nodded when my mother introduced me to him and after that he never said a word to me. He didn't even notice me. He was so big and strong and full of himself I suppose he couldn't bear to think that people like me existed.

He came to our house pretty regularly, usually to take my mother out somewhere for the evening. I watched the telly. I got pretty lonely then. When the programmes had finished for the night I used to sit in the kitchen and wait up for my mother, and though I was seventeen I used to

cry a lot. One morning I came down and found my mother's boyfriend having his breakfast in his dressing-gown. He didn't even look up at me when I came in the kitchen. When I looked at my mother she just pretended to be busy at the sink. After that his stays became more and more frequent till he was sleeping in our house every night. One afternoon they got dressed up smart and went out. When they came back they were laughing and falling about all over the place. They must have been drinking a lot. That night my mother told me they had got married and that I had to call him Father. That was the end. I had a fit, the worst one ever. I can't explain how bad it really was, it seemed to last for days, though it was only an hour or so. When it finished I opened my eyes and saw the look on my mother's face, complete disgust it was. You've no idea how much a person can change in such a short time. When I saw that look I realized she was as much a stranger to me as my father.

I stayed with them three months before they found a home to put me into. They were too busy with each other to notice me. They hardly spoke to me at all and they never spoke to each other when I was in the room. You know, I was pretty glad to get out of that place, even though it was my home, and I did cry a little when I left. But mostly I was glad to get away from them. And I suppose they were glad to see the last of me. It wasn't bad at the home they took me to. I didn't care where I was really. But they taught me to look after myself better and I even started to learn to read and write, though I've forgotten most of that now. I couldn't read that form you sent me, could I? That was pretty stupid. Anyway, it wasn't a bad life at this place. There were all kinds of weird people there and that made me feel more sure of myself. Three times a week they took me and a few others in a bus to a workshop

place where we learned how to repair watches and clocks. The idea was that when I left I would be able to stand by myself and earn a living. I've never earned a penny from it yet. You go for a job and they ask you where you got your training. When you tell them they don't want to know about it. One of the best things about the place was that I met Mr Smith. I know it doesn't sound much of a name, and he looked pretty ordinary so you wouldn't expect him to be anything special. But he was. He was in charge of the home and it was him who tried to teach me to read. I did all right. By the time I left I had just finished reading *The Hobbit* and I enjoyed that. But once I was outside I didn't have much time for that sort of thing. Still, old Smith had a good try at teaching me. And he taught me a lot of other things. I was still slurring my words when I arrived there and he corrected me every time I spoke. Then I had to repeat it the way he said it. And then he used to say I needed more grace. Yes, grace! In his room he had this enormous record player and he would put on records and make me dance. I felt bloody stupid about that at first. He told me to forget where I was and relax my body and drift about to the feel of the music. So I pranced round the room waving my arms and kicking my legs and hoping that no one could see me through the window. And then I started to enjoy it. It was almost like having a fit, you know, except that it was pleasant. I mean I could really lose myself, if you can imagine that. Then the record stopped and I'd be standing there sweating and catching my breath, feeling a bit of a nutter. Old Smith didn't mind, though. I danced for him twice a week, Mondays and Fridays. There were days when he played the piano instead of the records. I didn't enjoy that so much but I never said a word because I could see from his face that he was enjoying it.

And he started me on painting. Not ordinary painting, mind. Say, if you wanted to paint a tree you'd probably make a brown bit down and a green blob on the top. He said this was all wrong. There was a big garden at this place and one morning he took me out by some old trees. We stopped under one of them, a massive one it was. He said he wanted me to ... what was it ... I had to sense the tree and then re-create it. It was a long time before I saw what he was getting at. I went on painting in my own way. Then he showed me what he meant. He said suppose I wanted to paint that oak tree. What did I think of? Bigness, solidness, darkness. He painted thick black lines on the paper. I got the idea then and started painting things the way I felt about them. He told me to paint a picture of myself, and I painted these strange shapes in yellow and white. And after that my mother, and I made large red mouths all over the paper - that was her lipstick - and in the mouths I painted it black. That was because I hated her. Though I didn't really. I've never done any painting since I left, there isn't room for that sort of thing outside a place like that.

If I'm boring you just say so, I know you have to see a lot of people. No reason why you should sit with me. All right then. It was one of the rules of the home that you had to leave when you were twenty-one. I remember they made me a cake by way of compensation, except that I don't like cake so I gave it to the other kids. They gave me letters of introduction and the names and addresses of people to go and see. I didn't want to know about that. I wanted to be on my own. It means a lot when you've had people looking after you all your life, even if they are good to you. So I came to London. I managed it at first, I felt strong in my mind, you know, I felt as though I could take on London. It was all new then and exciting for someone who

had never been there in his life before. I found a room in Muswell Hill and started looking for a job. The only kind of jobs I came near to getting were lifting and carrying or digging. They'd take one look at me and tell me to forget it. Finally I found a job in a hotel, washing-up. It was a swanky place – the bit where the guests were, I mean. Deep red carpets and cut-glass chandeliers and a small orchestra playing in one corner of the hallway. I walked in the front bit by mistake on my first day. The kitchen wasn't so fine. Christ, no, it was a filthy shit-hole. They must have been understaffed because I was the only one washing-up. Or perhaps they saw me coming. Whatever it was, I had to do it all by myself, twelve hours a day with forty-five minutes for lunch.

I wouldn't have minded the hours of the work, I was pleased to be earning my own living for the first time in my life. No, it was the chief cook who really got me. He paid the wages and he was always cutting me short. The money of course went straight into his own pocket. He was an ugly bastard too. You never saw such spots. Over his face and forehead, under his chin, round by his ears, even on his ear lobes. Great puffy spots and scabs, red and yellow ones, I don't know why they let him near the food. Still, they didn't care too much about that sort of thing in that kitchen. They would have cooked the cockroaches if they had known how to catch them. The chief cook really got me. He used to call me scarecrow, and that was a great joke. 'Hey Scarecrow! Scared any more birds away?' He was one to talk. There could be no woman who would go near all that pus. His head was full of pus because he was a dirty-minded bastard. Always slobbering over his magazines. He used to chase after the women who were meant to keep the kitchen clean. They were all hags, none of them were under sixty, most of them black and ugly. I can

see him now, giggling and spitting and running his hands up their skirts. The women didn't dare say anything because he could throw them out. You might say that at least he was normal. But I'd rather be me any day.

Because I didn't laugh at his jokes like the others, Pus-face started getting really nasty. He went out of his way to find me more work to do, all the dirty jobs were mine. I was getting sick of all the scarecrow jokes, too, so one day when he'd made me scour all the pots three times over I said, 'Fuck off, Pus-face.' That really stung him. No one ever called him that to his face before. He left me alone for the rest of that day. But first thing next morning he came over to me and said, 'Get and clean the main oven.' There was this enormous cast-iron oven, see, and it got cleaned once a year, I think. Its walls were covered with a thick black scum. To get it off you had to get inside with a bowl of water and a scraper. It smelled like rotten cats inside that oven. I got a bowl of water and some scourers and crawled inside. You couldn't breath through your nose or you'd throw up. I had been in there ten minutes when the oven door shut. Pus-face had locked me in. I could just hear him laughing through the iron walls. He kept me in there five hours, till after my lunch break. Five hours in that stinking black oven, and after that he made me do the washing-up. You can imagine how furious I was. I wanted to keep my job so there was nothing I could say.

The very next morning Pus-face came up to me as I was beginning to wash up the breakfast plates. 'I thought I told you to clean that oven, Scarecrow.' So once again I got my things and crawled inside. And as soon as I was in the door slammed. I went mad. I screamed every name I could think of at Pus-face, and I hammered on the walls till my hands were raw. But I couldn't hear anything so

after a while I calmed down and tried to get comfortable. I had to keep moving my legs so as not to get cramp. After I had been in there what seemed six hours I heard Pus-face laughing outside. Then it started to get hot. I couldn't believe it at first, I thought I was imagining things. Pus-face had turned on the oven at its lowest marking. It soon got too hot to sit down and I had to crouch. I could feel it burning through my shoes, it was burning my face and up my nostrils. The sweat was running off me and every mouthful of air scorched my throat. I couldn't bang on the walls because they were too hot to touch. I wanted to scream but I couldn't afford the air. I thought I was going to die because I knew Pus-face was capable of roasting me alive. In the late afternoon he let me out. I was almost unconscious but I heard him say, 'Ah, Scarecrow, where've you been all day? I wanted you to clean out the oven.' Then he laughed and the others joined in, only because they were scared of him. I got a taxi home and went to bed. I was in a real mess. The next morning I was worse. There were blisters on my feet and down my spine where I must have leaned against the oven wall. And I was throwing up. There was one thing I was sure of in my mind, and that was that I had to get to work to even up with Pus-face, if it meant dying in the attempt. It was torture to walk so I took another taxi. Somehow I managed to get through the first part of the morning until break. Pus-face left me alone. During the break he was sitting by himself reading one of his dirty magazines. Just before it was time I lit the gas under one of the chip pans. It held about four pints and when the oil was boiling I carried it over to where Pus-face was sitting. The pain in the soles of my feet made me want to cry out. My heart was thumping because I knew I was going to get Pus-face. I came up level with his chair. He glanced up and by the look on my

face he knew exactly what was going to happen to him. But he didn't have time to move. I let the oil fall right into his lap, and for the benefit of anyone watching I pretended to slip. Pus-face howled like a wild animal, I never heard a man make a noise like that. His clothes seemed to dissolve and I could see his balls red and swelling and then turning white. It was all down his legs. He was screaming for twenty-five minutes before the doctor came and gave him morphine. I found out later that Pus-face spent nine months in hospital while they picked out the bits of clothing from his flesh. That was how I sorted Pus-face out.

I was too ill to stay in my job after that. I had paid my rent in advance and saved a little money. The next two weeks I spent hobbling from my room to the doctor's surgery each day. When the blisters had gone I started looking for another job. But by this time I didn't feel so strong. London was becoming too much for me. I found it hard to get out of bed in the mornings. It was better under the bedclothes, I was safer there. I was depressed by the thought of facing thousands of people, thundering traffic, queues and things like that. I began to think back to the old days when I was with my mother. I wished I was back there. The old cotton-wool life when everything was done for me, warm and safe. It sounds pretty stupid, I know, but I started thinking that perhaps my mother had got tired of that man she had married and that if I went back we could carry on the old life. Well, this was on my mind for days until I became obsessed by it. I thought of nothing else. I convinced myself that she was waiting for me, perhaps she had the police out looking for me. I had to go home and then she would take me in her arms, she would feed me with a spoon, we would make another cardboard theatre together. One evening I was thinking

of this when I decided to go to her. What was I waiting for? I ran out of doors and all the way down the street. I was almost singing with joy. I caught the train to Staines and I ran from the station to our house. It was going to be all right again. I slowed down when I turned down our road. The downstairs lights were on in the house. I rang the bell. My legs were trembling so much that I had to lean against the wall. The person who came to the door was not my mother. It was a girl, a very pretty girl of about eighteen. I couldn't think what to say. There was a stupid silence while I thought of something. Then she asked me who I was. I told her I used to live in the house and that I was looking for my mother. She said she had been living there with her parents for two years. She went inside to find out if any address had been left. While she was gone I was staring into the hallway. Everything was different. There were large book cases and another wall-paper, and a telephone which we never used to have. I felt really sad that it was changed, I felt cheated. The girl came back to tell me that no addresses had been left behind. I said goodnight and walked back down the pathway. I was left out. That house was really my own, and I wanted the girl to ask me inside, in the warm. If only she had put her arms round my neck and said, 'Come and live with us.' It sounds pretty stupid, but that was what I was thinking as I walked back to the station.

So I went back to looking for a job. I think it was the oven that did it. I mean it was the oven that made me think I could go back to Staines as if nothing had happened. I thought about that oven a lot. I made up daydreams about being made to stay inside an oven. That sounds incredible, especially after what I did to Pus-face. It was what I felt, though, and I couldn't help that. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that when I went to clean the

oven the second time I was secretly wanting to be shut in. I was sort of hoping it without knowing it, do you see what I mean? I wanted to be frustrated. I wanted to be where I couldn't get out. That was at the bottom of my mind. When I was actually in the oven I was too worried about getting out and too furious with Pus-face to enjoy anything. It was in my mind afterwards, that was all.

I had no luck with finding a job and as my money was running out I started stealing from shops. You might think that was an idiotic thing to do but it was dead easy. And what else could I do? I had to eat. I only took a little from each shop, usually from supermarkets. I wore a long overcoat with large pockets. I stole things like frozen meat and tins of things. I also had to pay the rent so I started taking more valuable things and selling them in secondhand shops. This was working quite nicely for about a month. I had all I wanted, and if I wanted something different all I had to do was put it in my pocket. But then I must have got careless because a store detective caught me stealing a watch from a counter. He didn't stop me there as I was doing it. No, he let me take it and then followed me out into the street. I was at the bus stop when he caught me by the arm and told me to come back to the shop. They got the police in and I had to appear in court. It turned out that they had been watching me for quite a while, so I was up for a number of things. Since I had never done anything before they made me report to a probation officer twice a week. That was lucky. I could have got six months straight away. That's what the police sergeant said.

Being on probation didn't get me food or pay the rent. The officer was all right, I suppose, he did his best. There were so many people on his books that he couldn't remember my name from Monday to Thursday. In all the jobs he

tried to get me they wanted someone who could read and write, and any other sort of job needed strength for lifting. Anyway, I didn't really want another job. I didn't want to meet any more people and get called Scarecrow again. So what could I do? I started stealing again. More carefully this time and never twice in the same place. But you know, I got caught almost immediately after about a week. I took an ornamental knife from a department store and because my coat pockets had carried so much they must have worn away. Just as I was going through the door the knife went straight out the bottom of my coat on to the floor. There were three of them on to me before I could even turn. I was back in front of the same magistrate again, and this time I got three months.

Prison's a funny place. Not that it would make you laugh. I thought they would all be tough gangsters in there, you know, hard men. But there were only a few like that. The rest were just cracked, like at the home I went to. It wasn't bad there, nowhere near as bad as I thought it was going to be. My cell wasn't very different from my room in Muswell Hill. In fact from the window there was a much better view from my prison room because I was higher up. There was a bed, table, a small book case and a sink. You could cut pictures out of magazines and stick them on the wall, and I wasn't allowed to do that in my room in Muswell Hill. Nor was I locked up in the cell, except for a couple of hours a day. We could wander about and visit the other cells, but only those on your floor. There was an iron gate which stopped you going up or down the stairs out of hours.

There were some strange types in that prison. There was a bloke who used to climb on his chair during meal time and expose himself. I was pretty shocked when it happened first, but everyone went on eating and talking so I did the

same. After a while it didn't bother me at all even though he did it quite regular. It's surprising what you can get used to in time. And then there was Jacko. He walked into my cell on the second morning and introduced himself. He said he was in for fraud and he told me how his father was a horse trainer and they were down on their luck. And on and on, a load of things he told me which I've forgotten. Then he walked out. Next time he came up and introduced himself all over again, as if he'd never seen me before in his life. This time he said he was inside for multiple rape and that he'd never been able to satisfy his sexual appetite. I thought he was having me on because I still believed his first story. He was dead serious, though. He had a different story each time he saw me. He never remembered our last conversation or who he was. I don't think he knew who he was himself. Like he didn't have an identity of his own. One of the others told me that Jacko was knocked over the head during an armed robbery. I don't know if that was true or not. You never know what to believe.

Don't get me wrong. They weren't all like that. There were some good blokes and one of the best was Deafy. No one knew his real name, nor could Deafy tell them because he was deaf and dumb. I think he had been inside nearly all his life. His cell was the most comfortable in the whole prison, he was the only one who was allowed to brew up tea for himself. I often sat in his room. Of course, there was no conversation. We just sat there, sometimes we smiled at each other, nothing else. He would make tea - the best I've ever tasted. Some afternoons I would doze in his armchair while he read one of his war comics from a pile he kept in the corner. When I had something on my mind I used to talk to him about it. He couldn't understand a word but he nodded and smiled or looked sad, whatever he thought was needed from the expression on my face. I think he

liked to feel that he was taking part in something. Most of the other prisoners ignored him most of the time. He was popular with the guards and they brought him whatever he wanted. Sometimes we'd have chocolate cake with our tea. He could read and write so he wasn't much worse off than I was.

Those three months were the best since I left home. I made my cell comfortable and I fell into a closed routine. I didn't speak to many people apart from Deafy. I didn't want to, I wanted a life without complications. You might be thinking that what I said about being locked in an oven was the same thing as being locked in a cell. No, it wasn't the pain-pleasure of feeling frustrated. It was a deeper pleasure of feeling safe. In fact I remember now wishing sometimes I had less freedom. I enjoyed the time of day we had to keep to our cells. If they had made us stay in them all day I don't think I would have complained, except that I would not have been able to see Deafy. I never had to plan anything. Each day was like the one before it. I didn't have to worry about meals and rent. Time stood still for me, like floating on a lake. I began to worry about coming out. I went to see the assistant governor and asked him if I could stay in. But he said it cost sixteen pounds a week to keep a man inside, and that there were plenty of others waiting to come in. They didn't have room for us all.

I had to come out then. They found me a job in a factory. I moved into this attic room where I've been ever since. In the factory I had to take tins of raspberries off a conveyor belt. I didn't mind that since it was so noisy you didn't have to speak to anyone. Now I'm strange. Not strange to me because I knew it was going to turn out like this. Ever since that oven, I want to be contained. I want to be small. I don't want this noise and these people all

around me. I want to be out of all that, in the dark. Do you see that wardrobe there, takes up most of this room? If you look inside you won't find any clothes hanging up. It's full of cushions and blankets. I go in there, I lock the door behind me and sit in the darkness for hours. That must sound pretty stupid to you. I feel all right in there. I don't get bored or anything, I just sit. Sometimes I wish the wardrobe would get up and walk around and forget that I was in there. At first I went in there only very occasionally but then it got more and more frequent till I started spending whole nights in there. I did not want to come out in the mornings either so I was late for work. Then I stopped going to work altogether. It's three months since I've been. I hate going outside. I prefer it in my cupboard.

I don't want to be free. That's why I envy these babies I see in the street being bundled and carried about by their mothers. I want to be one of them. Why can't it be me? Why do I have to walk around, go to work, cook my meals and do all the hundred things you have to do each day to keep alive? I want to climb in the pram. It's stupid, I'm six feet tall. But that doesn't make any difference to the way I feel. The other day I stole a blanket from a pram. I don't know why, I suppose I had to make contact with their world, to feel I was not completely irrelevant to it. I feel excluded. I don't need sex or anything like that. If I see a pretty girl like the one I was telling you about I get all bent up inside, and then I come back here and toss myself off, like I told you. There can't be many like me. I keep that blanket I stole in the cupboard. I want to fill it with dozens like it.

I don't go out much now. It's two weeks since I've been out of this attic. I bought some tins of food last time, though I am never very hungry. Mostly I sit in the

cupboard thinking about the old times in Staines, wishing it all again. When it rains at night it beats against the roof and I wake up. I think about that girl who lives in our house now, I can hear the wind and the traffic. I want to be one year old again. But it won't happen. I know it won't.