



PERSONAL HISTORY

ELEGY FOR IRIS

Scenes from an indomitable marriage.

By John Bayley

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For years now, we've usually managed a treat for ourselves on really hot days, at home in the summer. We take the car for a mile or two along the bypass road from Oxford, and twist abruptly off onto the verge—quite a tricky feat with fast-moving traffic just behind. Sometimes there are hoots and shouts from cars that have had to brake at speed, but by then we have jolted to a stop on the tussocky grass, locked the car, and crept through a gap in the hedge.

I remember the first time we did it, more than forty years ago. We were on bicycles, and there was little traffic on the unimproved road. Nor did we know where the river was, exactly: we just thought it must be somewhere there. And with the ardor of comparative youth we wormed our way through the rank grass and sedge until we almost fell into it, or, at least, a branch of it. Crouching in the shelter of the reeds, we tore off our clothes and slipped in like water rats. A kingfisher flashed past our noses as we lay soundlessly in the dark sluggish current. A moment after we had crawled out, and were drying ourselves on Iris's waist slip, a big pleasure boat chugged past within a few feet of the bank. The steersman, wearing a white cap, gazed intently ahead. Tobacco smoke mingled with the watery smell at the roots of the tall reeds.

I still have the waist slip. I rediscovered it the other day, bunched up at the back of a drawer and stiff with powdery traces of dry mud. It is faded to a yellowish color; a wrinkled ribbon, once blue, decorates the hem. Could someone, later my wife, once have worn such a garment? It looks like something preserved from the wardrobe of Marie Antoinette. I never gave it back to Iris after that occasion, and I think she forgot all about it.

It was typical of my relations with Iris, after we first met, that I had very little idea of the other people in her life, or what they might mean to her. That was probably due to the ecstatic egoism of falling in love for the first time. It

was 1953; I was twenty-eight; Iris was thirty-four. Iris existed for me as a wonderful and solitary being, first seen bicycling slowly and rather laboriously past a window in St. Antony's College, Oxford, where I was living. Trying to work, and gazing idly out at the passing scene on the Woodstock Road, I noted the lady on the bicycle—she was wearing a mackintosh, and seemed to me at once more a lady than a girl—and wondered who she was and whether I would ever meet her.

She was looking both absent and displeased. Maybe because of the weather, which was damp and drizzly. Maybe because her bicycle was old and creaky and hard to propel. Maybe because she hadn't yet met me? Her head was down, as if she were driving on thoughtfully toward some goal, whether emotional or intellectual. I remember a friend saying playfully, perhaps a little maliciously, after she first met Iris, "She is like a little bull."

There was something almost supernatural about the way I actually met her. The day after I saw her on the bicycle, I encountered Elaine Griffiths, a tutor of early English literature, in the street. Miss Griffiths had had a soft spot for me ever since my oral exam, when she congratulated me on my essay on Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" but caught me out on a minor question of Anglo-Saxon syntax. Now she suddenly asked me if I would care to come to her college room for a drink that evening. I was happy to accept. It could only be a good thing to be on social terms with a senior member of the English faculty, to which I aspired in time to belong.

All such prudential considerations vanished when I presented myself, at six o'clock that evening. Miss Griffiths was just finishing a tutorial, and as I knocked on the door a young woman in a scholar's gown came out. I barely glanced at her, for through the open doorway I had caught sight of the person of the bicycle—the girl? the lady?—standing and talking to some unseen character, with a well-filled glass in her hand.

She looked different from the bicycle lady, naturally enough. This was a social scene, and she was not wearing a mackintosh. Her short, fairish hair, unkempt

and roughly fringed on the forehead, looked both healthy and greasy, as it still does. Later on, I was to cut and shampoo it for her now and then; at that distant time she hardly bothered. Slovenliness in those days was next to seriousness, at least in university circles. Iris had on a worn and grubby tweed skirt, rather overlong and ungainly. I noticed that her legs were short and robust and were clad in brown cotton stockings. Nylons were still uncommon in the early fifties.

This woman certainly had a serious look, and it dawned on me that my bicycle lady must be an academic of some sort. That gave me an immediate feeling of despondency. It placed her; and I disliked the idea that she should be placed, even by me. At the same time, I was heartened by her general appearance and its total absence of anything that for me in those days constituted sex appeal. There was nothing so conventional as that about this woman. She was not "a girl," and she had no girlish attractions. This seemed highly satisfactory, for what was a rather ignoble reason. Since she had no obvious female charms, she was not likely to appeal to other men.

"Meet Miss Murdoch," Miss Griffiths said. "Iris, this is one of the more promising young ones in the English school. Very good results in Finals. I caught him out over Old English grammar, his weaker side, I fear, but he did a beautiful piece on the 'Knight's Tale.'"

That bloody "Knight's Tale." Was I never going to hear the end of it? Iris Murdoch gave me a kindly look, said "Hullo," and continued talking to another guest at the party. Miss Griffiths handed me a glass, from which I at once took a desperate swig. I coughed, and felt myself going scarlet in the face. It was a strong gin and French vermouth, the English equivalent of an American Martini—no ice in those days, of course.

I never managed to talk to Iris that evening, although after two or three other men arrived I hovered vainly near her. The god of chance seemed, however, to be in a long-suffering mood, and he patiently set to work once more. Asked to supper by friends three weeks later, I discovered that Iris was my sole fellow-

guest. But I soon felt that I was failing again. Although she was friendly and not at all shy, Iris was not a helpful conversationalist. I offered openings and raised points in what I hoped was an interesting way, but she smiled kindly and did not respond. She was teaching and writing philosophy, and like many philosophers in Oxford she had the habit of considering what was said in a judicious silence. She turned my poor little point over, as if asking, "What exactly does this mean?" and if she decided that, indeed, it meant very little she was too polite to say.

Quite abruptly, Iris said that she must go home. Our hosts looked disappointed. For the first time, I managed to seize the moment, and I said, regretfully, that I must go, too. Our hosts looked more philosophical about that: it was Iris they had wanted, almost greedily, to stay; and I was surprised by this, because as a guest she had seemed to take very little trouble, if any, even though she had disseminated around her what seemed an involuntary aura of beneficence and good will.

Good nights having been said and the front door closed, we unlocked our bicycles and set out together into the damp, mild Oxfordshire night. My lights were in order; her front one dimmed and wavered on the verge of extinction, and I respectfully urged her to bicycle on the inside, and to keep as close as possible to my own illumination. Then we rode in silence, and I assumed it was to break it that she asked me in a friendly way if I had ever thought of writing a novel. It was a wholly unexpected question, but for once my answer was ready. Yes, indeed, I was writing one, or trying to write one, at that moment.

But why should Miss Murdoch ask me about novels? It must be to indulge me and get me to talk about myself, for clearly she, a philosopher, could have no interest in the matter. She probably never read novels, being far too busy with higher things. I made some deprecating comment to this effect, and the next moment Miss Murdoch said that she herself had written a novel, which was shortly to be published.

I felt overwhelmed with awe and admiration. So this extraordinary creature had thrown off a novel, as if negligently, in the intervals of a busy life of teaching. "You mustn't tell anyone," she said, stopping her bicycle and putting a foot to the ground. She looked straight at me, speaking lightly but also very seriously. "I don't want anyone to know."

I gave a fervent undertaking: I would not reveal her secret to a soul. As we stood there in the dark road, half on and half off our bicycles, I felt that this wonderfully intuitive and perspicuous being had seen right down inside me, liked what she saw, and judged it worthy of her fullest trust. And could she have known that I had fallen in love with her, and decided, like a philosopher, on a ground of reason and good sense, that she was also in love with me?

As I came to know her, it occurred to me to wonder if she had not revealed this secret of her novel to quite a number of people. Most of her many friends in London must have known about it. What is more, some of them must even have read it—and in Iris's own handwriting. One couple—old friends of hers—took good care to let me know, when they saw that I was becoming friendly with Iris, that they had read the manuscript. For, of course, there is something highly displeasing about one of our friends getting to know our other friends without telling us, as La Rochefoucauld might have said.

Like all lovers, I suppose, I wished to be a special case in quite the wrong sense—to be "the one." I felt that by telling me that she didn't want anyone to know of the novel's existence Iris was singling me out. But her instinct, in this regard, was, essentially, a kindly one. She wanted each of her friends to know her in the same pristine way. No groups, no sets. No comparing of notes between two about a third. This desire that each of her relationships should be special and separate, as innocent as in the Garden of Eden, was of great significance with Iris. Since what she felt about each of her friendships was totally genuine and without guile, there was no graduation among them, no comparisons made. Each one was whole in itself.

After we remounted and rode slowly on, I inquired diffidently about the content of her novel. What was it about? How had she come to write it? She

made no direct reply, but, much more exciting, she said how important it was for any narration to “have something for everybody.” I was surprised but also impressed by the simplicity of the idea, and the force with which she expressed it, slowly and reflectively.

“A bit like Shakespeare,” I suggested.

“Well, perhaps, yes,” she said.

In early summer of the following year, St. Antony’s College gave a modest dance. Although I was not by training or by temperament a dancing man, I determined to ask Iris if she would come with me. Iris accepted with alacrity. This caused a range of complications in my heart. Other people, my colleagues at St. Antony’s, for example, would ask her to dance, and suppose one of them were to fall in love with her, or she with him? There were other, more pressing practical considerations: Where would I take her to dine before the dance? I had no money to spare, but I felt it must be somewhere reasonably good, and so I chose the Regency restaurant, which advertised itself in the Oxford *Mail* as serving “probably the best food in Oxfordshire.” At half past six on the appointed evening, I went to collect Iris in her college room. After I knocked, a voice from within requested me to hang on a minute. While waiting, I speculated about what she would look like and what she would be wearing. I hoped that it would be something dark, preferably black—suited to the person of mature years and sober disposition whom I still assumed her to be.

The door opened. An apparition in a sort of flame-colored brocade stood before me. I felt in some way scandalized—dazzled and appalled, at the same time. All my daydreams, my illusions and preconceptions about the woman—the girl? the lady?—of the bicycle vanished into a past that I would very much have preferred to be inhabiting. I still thought her face attractively homely and not, in any conventional sense, pretty or attractive, even if it was a strong face in its own blunt-featured, snub-nosed way. But now I was seeing it as other people saw it. Although the face was in no way conventional itself, its trappings, so to

speak, were. They seemed the sort of things that any girl would wear—a silly girl who had not the taste to choose her clothes carefully.

Iris seemed preoccupied. Perhaps about her face, which she now dabbed with powder, or her hair, or some hitch in her underwear. She wriggled and pulled at her dress uneasily, as if she were unfamiliar with whatever lay underneath it. Or perhaps she was preoccupied with the thought of what she might be doing somewhere else, with some other friends. She seemed preoccupied with anything and everything except me, of whom she appeared as unaware as she had been when she rode past my window. She didn’t look at me, but she did take my hand, in an absent way, as we left for the dance.

The restaurant was a disaster. I can’t remember what we ate, but it was very nasty, and the waiter was both gloomy and supercilious. Even the red wine was tasteless. But, as the dreadful dinner went on, our spirits, amazingly, rose. We began to giggle and to talk in whispers about the other, sepulchral-looking diners. At the end of it, Iris excused herself and went out to the ladies’ room, leaving me to pay the bill. When she finally emerged, she was transformed again. Now she looked like a doll—a Watteau china doll with incongruously schoolgirl hair. She had slathered her mouth with lipstick, which she now proceeded, in an amateurish way, to kiss at with a scrap of paper taken from her bag.

St. Antony’s, a former Anglican convent, was built around 1870. A steep flight of stone steps led down to the crypt below the nuns’ chapel—now the library—in which the dance was to be held. As we descended, Iris trod on her long dress, slipped, and slid inelegantly down a few steps on her behind. People rushed to help, and I found myself entertaining the unworthy thought that she might have sprained her ankle; not badly, but enough to incapacitate her for the evening.

But Iris was not hurt at all. She got up and smiled while the others brushed her down, amid laughter and joking. We moved onto the floor among a crowd. I made a few introductions. She seemed already to have made new friends. Her

manner was no longer quiet and withdrawn. I made unconfident gestures indicative of asking her to dance, and we assumed the appropriate semi-embrace.

My dancing was indeed unconfident. I had sometimes enjoyed it at hops in the night clubs or on weekends in the Army, when already more than a little drunk. Now, as we moved, there seemed no correlation between the different parts of us. Iris smiled at me encouragingly, and a few seconds later relinquished me and began to execute arm twirlings and arabesques on her own. She looked ungainly and rather affected, but touchingly naïve at the same time. It seemed clear that she knew no more about dancing à deux than I did; but when we brushed accidentally against another couple a few seconds later, and the man turned with a smile and seized hold of her, she melted into him at once, and the pair swung off together in perfect unison. The girl whom the man had been with did not look pleased, but she, too, had no choice except to smile as we began to revolve in some sort of way. I felt that the dance was already going against me, and that success had already gone beyond recall.

The band gave a flourish and stopped. Iris came back to me at once, looking happy and relaxed. She asked about my room in the college, which she had not yet seen. I asked if she would like to go up there, thinking of the bottle of champagne I had bought that morning and put in the cupboard, along with two glasses. She said she would like to very much. I took her arm as we mounted the stone steps, in case she had another fall. My room was small and Spartan: a bed, the cupboard, a table, and a wooden chair. But there was a gas fire, which I now turned on. I got the bottle and the glasses out of the cupboard. As I put them down on the table, we fell into each other's arms.

We never returned to the dance but sat in my room until two in the morning. We talked without stopping. I had had no idea I could talk like that, and I am sure Iris never knew she could, either. I think that she was accustomed only to talking properly, as it were: considering, pausing, modifying, weighing her words. Now she babbled like a child. So did I. With arms around each other, kissing and rubbing noses—I said how much I loved her snub nose—we

rambled on and on, seeming to invent on the spot, as we talked, a whole infantile language of our own. From time to time, she put her head back and laughed at me incredulously; I think we both felt incredulous. She seemed to be giving way to some deep need of which she had been wholly unconscious: the need to throw away not only the maneuvers and rivalries of intellect but the emotional fears and fascinations, the power struggles and surrenders of adult loving. Long, long afterward, I had to look through her manuscripts and papers to find some stuff requested by her publisher. In the back of an exercise book containing notes for a novel, I found an entry, dated June 3, 1954, that read, "St. Antony's Dance. Fell down the steps, and seem to have fallen in love with J. We didn't dance much."

We trail slowly over the long field toward the river. The heat seems worse than ever, although the sun, overcast, does not beat down as fiercely as it did earlier in the day. The hay was carried some time before, and the brownish surface of the field is baked hard and covered with molehills. A pair of crows flaps lazily away as we approach the riverbank. Crows are said to live a long time, and I wonder idly if they are the same birds we saw here on our bathing visits, many years past.

The little nook where we usually entered the river is empty, as usual. Once, we would have shed our clothes as soon as possible and slid silently into the water, as we did on that first occasion. Now I have quite a struggle getting Iris's clothes off: I managed to put her bathing dress on at home, before we started. Her instinct nowadays seems to be to take her clothes off as little as possible. Even in this horribly hot weather, it is hard to persuade her to remove trousers and jersey before getting into bed.

She protests, gently though vigorously, as I lever off the outer layers. In her shabby old swimsuit, a two-piece, with a skirt and separate tunic top, she is an awkward and anxious figure, her socks trailing round her ankles. She is obstinate about not taking them off, and I give up the struggle. A pleasure barge chugs slowly past, an elegant girl in a bikini sunning herself on the deck, a young man in white shorts at the steering wheel. Both turn to look at us with

an air of disbelief. I should not be surprised if they burst into guffaws of ill-mannered laughter, for we must present a comic spectacle—an elderly man struggling to remove the garments from an old lady, with white skin and incongruously fair hair.

Iris suffers—as her mother did before her—from Alzheimer’s. Its victims are not always gentle: I know that. But Iris remains her old self in many ways. The power of concentration has gone, along with the ability to form coherent sentences, and to remember where she is or has been. She does not know that she has written twenty-six remarkable novels, as well as her books on philosophy; received honorary doctorates from major universities; become a Dame of the British Empire. If an admirer or a friend asks her to sign a copy of one of her novels, she looks at it with pleasure and surprise before laboriously writing her name and, if she can, that person’s: “For Georgina Smith.” “For Dear Reggie.” It takes her some time, but the letters are still formed with care, and they resemble, in a surreal way, her old handwriting. She is always eager to oblige. And the old gentleness remains.

Once in the water, Iris cheers up a bit. It is almost too warm, hardly refreshing. But the river’s old brown slow-flowing deliciousness remains, and we smile happily at each other as we paddle quietly to and fro. Water-lily leaves, with an occasional fat yellow flower, rock gently at the passage of a pleasure boat. Small, bright-blue dragonflies hover motionless above them. The water is deep, and cooler as we move out from the bank, but we do not go out far. Looking down, I can see Iris’s muddy feet, still in their socks, moving in the brown depths. Once, if there had been little river traffic about, we would have swum straightaway the hundred yards or so across the river and back. Now it is too much trouble, and a possible producer of that omnipresent anxiety of Alzheimer’s which speaks to the one who looks after the Alzheimer’s sufferer. Not that it would be dangerous; Iris still swims as naturally as a fish. Since we first entered the water here together, forty-four years ago, we have swum in the sea, in lakes and rivers, in pools and ponds, whenever we could and wherever we happened to be.

Iris was never keen on swimming, as such. She never swam fast and noisily or did fancy strokes. It was being in the water that she loved. Twice she came quite close to drowning. I think of those times, with the anxiety that has now invaded both our lives, as we approach the river’s bank again, to scramble out. This has always been a more difficult and inelegant operation than slipping into the river, but it has never bothered us in the past. The river is as deep near the bank as in midstream, the bank itself undercut by the water’s flow. I pull myself out first and turn to help Iris. As she takes my hands, her face contracts into that look of childlike dread which so often comes over it now, filling me, too, with worry and fear. Suppose her arm muscles fail her and she slips back into deep water, forgetting how to swim, and letting water pour into her mouth as she opens it in a soundless appeal to me? I know on the spot that we must never come to bathe here again.

Occasionally, Iris used to ask me about some technical detail she wanted for a novel. Once she inquired about automatic pistols—my old Army training made it easy to answer that one—and sometimes about cars, or wine, or what would be a suitable thing for a certain character to eat. The hero of “The Sea, The Sea” required, so to speak, a very special diet, and I had fun suggesting all sorts of unlikely combinations to which he might be partial: oat bran and boiled onions, fried garlic and sardines, tinned mango and Stilton cheese. Some of these found their way into the novel, and when it won the Booker Prize one of the judges, the philosopher A. J. Ayer, remarked in his prizegiving speech that he had much enjoyed everything in the novel “except for the food.”

Only to one of Iris’s novels, and that was a long time ago, did I contribute a small section myself. It was in her fourth novel, “The Bell,” published in 1958. For a reason I now forget, she asked me to read the first chapter, which has one of her most sibylline, epigrammatic openings. She never used a typewriter, and in her first handwritten version it read, “Dora Greenfield left her husband because she was afraid of him. A year later she returned to him for the same reason.” I was thrilled by this instant concision, but as I read on I began to feel

an immediate inquisitiveness about young Dora Greenfield and her husband, Paul, which the early pages did not satisfy. So arresting were they, as characters, that I wanted to know a little more of them at once, to be given a hint by which to glimpse their potential. I said something of the sort to Iris, who said, "O.K., then, you write something for me."

At the time, I was trying to write a critical study later titled "The Characters of Love." I was bewitched by Henry James, who observed to a friend about one of the ladies in a novel he was writing that he could already take "a stiff examination" on her. Concerning such a personality, he remarked, the author needs to supply a forewarning, "an early intimation of perspective." With this in mind, I set out to produce some idea of what might have happened to Dora and her husband, even if it was to have no part in the book, whose story as yet I did not know.

My idea was that he, as a husband, deeply needed and wanted children, even if he was not necessarily conscious of the fact, while she—being much younger than her husband—did not. I suggested that she had it in her, nonetheless, to become "a prompt and opinionated mother," and that this would be her only means of standing up to Paul. As it was, she was highly alarmed at the prospect of "becoming two people," although, being passive in her manner, she had done nothing to inhibit conception. In the end, she had come back to her husband like an apprehensive sleepwalker, still unconsciously depending on the ability of her fears to "whisk her instantly away, like a small animal."

I produced something to this effect, and the results are on page 7 of the novel, in a longish paragraph. It reads a bit too much in the Jamesian style, rather than merging into Iris's inimitable originality; but it does, perhaps, have the function of suggesting alternatives and open spaces, which the scope and intent of the novel will not necessarily want to occupy. The novel's theme is the desire for and pursuit of the spiritual life, whether true or false. I had nothing to contribute to Iris's marvellous feeling for what some people hunger for, and how, in consequence, they behave. Indeed, I have very little understanding of

the spiritual life; but that has never stopped me from having a passionate appetite for Iris's novels, which I have usually read only after publication. This sympathy for what might be going on in Iris's mind, together with my inability to understand or enter into it, must have developed quite early in our relationship. Already, by the time of "The Bell," we were beginning that strange and beneficent process in marriage by which a couple can, in the words of the Australian poet A. D. Hope, move "closer and closer apart." The apartness is a part of the closeness, perhaps a recognition of it: certainly a pledge of complete understanding. There is nothing threatening or supervisory about such an understanding, nothing of what couples really mean when they say (or are alleged to say) to confidants or counsellors, "the trouble is that my wife/husband doesn't understand me"—which usually means that one partner in the relationship understands the other one all too well, and doesn't rejoice in the experience.

Still less is such apartness like what the French call *solitude à deux*, the self-isolation of a couple from anything outside their marriage. The solitude I have enjoyed in marriage, and I think Iris has, too, is a little like having a walk by oneself, and knowing that tomorrow, or soon, one will be sharing it with the other, or perhaps again having it alone. It is a solitude, too, that precludes nothing outside the marriage, and sharpens the sense of possible intimacy with things or people in the outside world.

Such sympathy in apartness takes time to grow, however, as well as being quite different in nature from that intoxicating sense of the strangeness of another being which accompanies the excitements of falling in love. The more I got to know Iris, during the early days of our relationship, the less I understood her. Indeed, I soon began not to want to understand her. I was far too preoccupied at the time to think of such parallels, but it was like living in a fairy story—the kind with sinister overtones and a not always happy ending—in which a young man loves a beautiful maiden who returns his love but is always disappearing into some unknown and mysterious world, about which she will reveal nothing. Eventually, he makes some dire mistake, and she disappears for good. At this

distance in time, that comparison seems more or less true, if a bit fanciful. Iris was always disappearing, to “see” her friends (I began to wonder and to dread, early on, what the word “see” might involve), about whom—unlike the girl in the fairy tale—she was always quite open. I knew their names; I imagined them; I never met them.

And there seemed to be so many of them. Persons who were, in a sense, in my own position. Iris seemed deeply and privately attached to them all. No doubt in all sorts of different ways. I could only hope that she did not talk to any of the others in quite the way that she talked with me, chattered childishly with me, kissed me. This Iris was so different from the grave being I had seen on the bicycle, or at a party in the public domain, that I sometimes wondered what had become of the woman I had fallen in love with. Absurdly, I had imagined our future together as somehow equally grave, a wonderfully serious matter, involving only the pair of us, of course, for no one else in the world was or would be in the least interested in either of us. We were, simply, made for each other, and we would exist on that basis.

The happy childlike girl or woman Iris had now turned into when she was with me was delightful, but also—as I sometimes could not stop myself wistfully thinking—fundamentally unreal, like the girl in the fairy story. This could not be the real Iris. But, with the hindsight that also sees a parallel with the fairy story, I can now feel that I was giving Iris, without my knowing it, the alternative being that she required: the irresponsible, even escapist persona that she had no idea she wanted or needed.

As our relationship became more serious, and as we became aware that we were travelling inevitably toward a separation or a solution we couldn't anticipate or foresee, Iris once or twice mentioned the myth of Proteus. This was in reply to my despairing comment that I couldn't understand her, or the different person she became for the many others with whom she seemed, in my view, helplessly entangled. “Remember Proteus,” she used to say. “Just keep tight hold of me and it will be all right.” Proteus had the power of changing himself into any shape he wished—lion, serpent, monster, fish—but if any opponent held him

tightly throughout all these transformations he was compelled in the end to surrender, and to resume his proper shape as a divinity.

I used to reply gloomily that I was not—as a mere professor of English—the kind of person who would be a match for Proteus, lacking a hero's resources of muscle power and concentration. Then we would laugh and become our secret and childish selves again—as we had been when we first crawled through the undergrowth and slipped secretly into the river.

A woman I sometimes meet, whose husband is, like Iris, an Alzheimer's sufferer, once cheerfully remarked, “Like being chained to a corpse, isn't it?” Then she amended the remark, giving me a slightly roguish glance: “Oh, a much loved corpse, naturally.”

I was repelled by the suggestion that Iris's affliction could have anything in common with that of this jolly woman's husband. It's not an unusual reaction, as I've come to realize, among Alzheimer partners. One needs very much to feel that the unique individuality of one's spouse has not been lost in the common symptoms of a clinical condition.

But the woman's image of the corpse and the chain did not lose its power to haunt me. There is a story by Thomas Hardy called “On the Western Circuit,” in which a young barrister meets a country girl while accompanying the rounds of the circuit judge. They fall in love and he makes her pregnant. Because she is illiterate, she implores the sympathetic married woman in whose house she works as a maid to write letters for her to the young man. Her mistress does so, and as a result of their correspondence begins to fall for the young man herself. He, instead of escaping from his predicament, as he had first intended, becomes so charmed by the girl's sensible and loving little letters that he determines to marry her. The marriage takes place in London, and the sole meeting between the young man and the girl's employer, before she returns to her own lonely and barren married life in Wessex, reveals to him their involuntary intimacy. The love letters she has written have made him love her—not the girl—and he is

left to face the future fettered to an unchosen partner, like a slave chained to another in a galley.

I remembered the story while the woman was speaking. Our situations were not the same as that of the young man and the girl. Fate had not deceived us. We had known our partners as equals over many years, told and listened and communed together, until communication had dwindled and faltered and all but ceased. No more letters, no more words. An Alzheimer's sufferer begins many sentences, usually with an anxious repetitive query, but they remain unfinished, the want unexpressed. Usually it is predictable and easily satisfied, but Iris produces every day many such queries, involving "You know, that person," or, simply, "that . . .," which take time and effort to unravel. Often they remain totally enigmatic, related to some unidentifiable man or woman in the past who has swum up to the surface of her mind, as if encountered yesterday. At such times, I feel my own mind and memory faltering; it is as if they'd been required to perform a function too far outside their own beat and practice.

The continuity of joking can very often rescue such moments. A burst of laughter, snatches of doggerel, song, teasing nonsense rituals once lovingly exchanged awake an abruptly happy response, and a sudden beaming smile that must resemble those moments in the past between explorers and savages, when some sort of clowning pantomime on the part of the former seems to have evoked instant comprehension and amusement on the part of the latter. At cheerful moments, over drinks or in the car, Iris sometimes twitters away incomprehensibly but self-confidently, happily convinced that an animated exchange is taking place. This prompts me to produce my own stream of consciousness, silly sentences, or mashed-up quotations. "The tyrant of the Chersonese was freedom's best and bravest friend," I assure her, giving her a solemnly meaningful look. At which she nods her head gravely, and seems to act out a conspiring smile, as if the ringing confidence of Byron's lines mean a lot to her, too.

Our mode of communication seems like underwater sonar, each of us bouncing pulsations off the other and listening for an echo. The baffling moments when I

cannot understand what she is saying, or about whom or what—moments that can produce in Iris tears and anxieties, though never, thank goodness, the raging frustration typical of many Alzheimer's sufferers—can sometimes be dispelled by my embarking on a jokey parody of helplessness, and trying to make it mutual: both of us at a loss for words.

At happy moments, Iris seems to find words more easily than I do—like the swallows when we lived in the country. Sitting on the telephone wire outside our bedroom window, a row of swallows would converse animatedly with one another, always, it seemed, signing off each burst of twittering speech with a word that sounded like "Weatherby," delivered on a rising note. Now I tease Iris by saying, "You're just like a Weatherby, chattering away." She loves to be teased, but when I make the tease a tender one by adding, "I love listening to you," her face clouds over. She can always tell the difference between the irresponsibility of a joke or a straight tease and the note of "caring" or of "loving care"—which, however earnest and true, always sounds inauthentic.

Most days are, for her, a sort of despair, although despair suggests a conscious and positive state whereas what she feels is a vacancy that frightens her by its lack of dimension. She mutters "I'm a fool" or "Why didn't I?" or "I must," and I try to seem to explain the trouble while rapidly suggesting that we must post a letter, walk around the block, go shopping in the car. Something urgent, practical, giving the illusion of sense and routine. The Reverend Sydney Smith, a benevolent clergyman of Jane Austen's time, urged a parishioner in the grip of depression to take "short views of human life—not further than dinner or tea." I used to quote this to Iris, when her troubles began, as if I were recommending a real policy, which could intelligibly be followed. Now I repeat it sometimes as an incantation or a joke, which can raise a laugh if it is accompanied by some horsing around, a live pantomime of "short views" being taken.

Smiling transforms Iris's face, bringing it back to what it used to be like, and with an added glow that can seem almost supernatural. The Alzheimer's face has been clinically described as the "lion face"—an apparently odd comparison but in fact a very apt one. The features settle into a leonine impassivity that

does remind one of the king of beasts and the way his broad, expressionless mask is represented in painting and sculpture. The Alzheimer's face is neither tragic nor comic, as a face can appear in other forms of dementia, suggesting human emotion in its most distorted guises. The Alzheimer's face indicates only an absence. It is, in the most literal sense, a mask.

That is why the sudden appearance of a smile is so extraordinary. Then the lion face becomes the face of the Virgin Mary, with a gravity that gives such a smile, in paintings and sculpture, its deepest meaning. Only a joke survives—the last thing to find its way into consciousness when the brain is atrophied. After all, the Virgin Mary presides over the greatest joke of the lot, the wonderful fable made up, elaborated, repeated all over the world. No wonder she is smiling. My ancient Greek is virtually non-existent; and Iris's—which once was extensive—has gone completely. I used to try reading the "Agamemnon" and other Greek plays to her in translation, but it was not a success. Nor was any other attempt at reading aloud. It all seemed and felt unnatural. I did several chapters of "The Lord of the Rings" and "The Tale of Genji," two of Iris's old favorites, before I realized this. For someone who was accustomed not so much to read books as to slip into their world as effortlessly as she slipped into a river or the sea, this laborious procession of words clumping into her consciousness must have seemed a tedious irrelevance, although she recognized the people and events described. But the relation of such recognition to true memory is clearly a painful one. Tolkien and Lady Murasaki had been inhabitants of her mind, as native to its world as were the people and events who so mysteriously came to her in her process of creation. To meet them again in this way was an embarrassment.

I think that the attempt at reading and being read to was also a reminder to Iris of the loss of identity—although "reminder" is hardly the word for what she must be feeling, for an Alzheimer's patient is not usually conscious, in any definable way, of what has happened. Some sufferers do remain conscious of their state, paradoxical as this seems. The torment of knowing that you cannot speak or think what you want must be intolerable, and I have met patients in

whom such a torment is clearly visible. But when Iris speaks to me the result seems normal to her and to me surprisingly fluent, provided I do not listen to what is being said but apprehend it in a matrimonial way, as the voice of familiarity, and thus of recognition.

Time constitutes an anxiety because its conventional shape and progression have gone, leaving only a perpetual query. There are some days when "When are we leaving?" never stops, though the question is repeated without agitation. Indeed, there can seem something quite peaceful about it, as if it hardly mattered when we went, or where, and to stay at home might in any case be preferable. In Faulkner's novel "Soldier's Pay," the blinded airman says to his friend, "When am I going to get out?" This makes one flinch: the writer has contrived, unerringly, to put the reader in the blind man's place. Iris's query does not, in itself, suggest desire for change or release into a former state of being; nor does she want to know when we are getting in the car and going out to lunch. The journey on which we are leaving may for her mean the final one; or, if that sounds too portentous, simply some sort of disappearance from the daily life that, without her work, must have lost all sense and identity.

Iris once told me that the question of identity had always puzzled her. In fact, she thought that she herself hardly possessed such a thing, whatever it was. I replied that she must know what it was like to be oneself, even to revel in the consciousness of oneself, as a secret and separate person—a person unknown to any other. She smiled, was amused, and looked uncomprehending. It was not something she bothered about. "Then you live in your work? Like Keats and Shakespeare and all that?" I said. She disclaimed any such comparison; and she did not seem particularly interested when I went on to speak of the well-known Romantic distinction between the great egocentric writers, like Wordsworth or Milton, whose sense of self was so overpowering that it included everything else, and those identity-free spirits, like Shakespeare and Keats, for whom being is not what they are but the world they live in and reveal. As a philosopher, she, I suspect, found all such distinctions crude. Perhaps one has to be very much

aware of oneself as a person in order to find them at all meaningful or interesting. Nobody less narcissistic than Iris can be imagined.

Conceivably, it is the persons who hug their identity most closely to themselves for whom the condition of Alzheimer's is most dreadful. Iris's own lack of a sense of identity seemed to float her more gently into the Alzheimer's world of preoccupied emptiness. Placidly, every night, she insists on laying out quantities of her clothing on my side of the bed, and when I quietly remove them back they come again. She wants to look after me—is that it? It may be a simpler sort of confusion, for when we go to bed she often asks me which side she should be on. Or is it something deeper and fuller, less conscious and less “caring” than that far too self-conscious adjective suggests? She has never wanted to look after me in the past, thank goodness; indeed, one of the pleasures of living with Iris was her serenely benevolent unawareness of one's daily welfare. So restful. She never needed to tell herself to look after me. But when I broke my leg once in the snow at Christmas, and had to lie up for a few days in Banbury hospital, a dozen miles off, she came and stayed in a bed-and-breakfast hotel outside the hospital gate. I besought her to remain at home and work, instead of wasting her time. There was nothing she could do. But no. She stayed there until I was fit enough to come home with her.

We were married in 1956, nearly three years after we first met. Our idea for a honeymoon was to take a cultural tour, in a leisurely manner, down through France and over the Alps into northern Italy, during which we would stop, whenever we felt like it, to get ourselves wet. Our first swim was in a deep, placid tributary of the Somme—perhaps the place of the poem by Wilfred Owen, where hospital barges had been moored during those futile offensives of the First World War. The next swim was much farther south, in a steep and wild wooded valley, with pine and chestnut growing up the mountains. The water was warm and the stream so secluded that we slipped in with nothing on. Usually cautious, Iris may have felt that, since we were in France, Anglo-Saxon inhibition could be discarded. In this remote spot, my feet encountered a smooth round object in the shallows. It was half buried in the ooze, but I fished

it up without difficulty and found an object like a Greek or Roman amphora, earth-colored and cracked in one or two places. It was clearly not ancient—we found a trade name stamped on the base—and I was about to let it sink back into its underwater home when Iris, treading water beside me, vigorously demurred. Even at that date, she wanted to keep everything she found. It lived on for years in a corner of our garden back home, until its cracks were found out by the frost and it came to pieces.

After setting it down on the bank, we slipped in again for another swim. Iris seemed dreamy and absent. “Suppose we had found a great old bell,” she said as we dried ourselves. I pointed out that this would hardly be likely in such a wild spot, far from any town or village. But her imagination was equal to that one.

“It could have been stolen from a belfry and buried in the river until they could dispose of it. People at home are stealing lead from country churches all the time, aren't they? Then the thieves here never came back.”

“Quite a recent event? Nothing legendary about it?”

“No, wait. The church was desecrated at the Reformation by those . . . what did they call them in France?” she appealed, as she stood beside me, an earnest figure streaked all over with river mud, which she was vaguely spreading over herself with a towel.

“Huguenots?”

“That's it. The Huguenots got down the bell and wanted to break it up or melt it or something, but some devoted worshippers of the old church managed to steal it away and bring it here for safekeeping.”

Although she had done ancient history in her exams, Iris had done her best papers in philosophy, and her sense of the historical was certainly rather sketchy. But, as her novels show, her imagination possessed its own brand of sometimes almost pedantic accuracy.

The most striking episode in “The Bell” certainly came out of that river. A great bell is found in the lake on the grounds of an old abbey, now the center of a modern religious community. The symbol of the bell is enigmatic; not so the penetrating and contrasting account of characters who wish to try to lead the religious life. I always felt that there was something wonderfully literal about the discovery of the great bell, which reminded me of “Alice in Wonderland,” one of Iris’s favorite books.

The life of inanimate things was always close to her. I used to tease her about Wordsworth’s flower, which the poet was confident “enjoys the air it breathes.” “Never mind about flowers,” Iris would say, impatiently and somewhat mysteriously, adding, “There are other things that matter much more.” She felt real sadness for abandoned bottles, and I think of that now when she stoops like an old tramp to pick up scraps of candy paper or cigarette ends from the pavement. She feels at one with them, and will find them a home if she can.

Iris is, without question, the most genuinely modest person I have ever met. Modesty is apt to be something acted, by each individual in his or her own way—part of the armory with which people intend to confront the world. Iris has no pride in being modest: I don’t think she even knows she is. The normal anxieties and preoccupations of successful writers about status and the future—whether, to put it crudely, they can keep it up—were with her completely absent. Now that she has forgotten all about it anyway, I am struck by the almost eerie resemblance between the amnesia of the present and the tranquil indifference of the past. In the old days, she went on secretly and quietly doing her work, never wishing to talk about it, never needing to compare or discuss or contrast, never reading reviews or wanting to hear about them, never needing the continual reassurance from friends or public or the media which most writers require in order to go on being sure that they are writers.

Iris’s works, at least to me, are genuinely mysterious, like Shakespeare’s. About her greatness as a novelist, I have no doubts at all, although she has never needed, possessed, or tried to cultivate the charisma that is the most vital element to the success of a sage or mage. Her books create a new world, which

is also, in an inspired sense, an ordinary one. They have no axe to grind; they are devoid of intellectual pretension, or the need to be different. They are not part of a personality that fascinates and mesmerizes its admirers. Although any of her readers might say or feel that a person or an event in her fiction could occur only in a Murdoch novel, this does not mean that the personality of the writer herself is, in any obvious sense, remarkable.

Where Iris is concerned, my memory, like a snug-fitting garment, seems to have zipped itself up to the present second. As I work in bed early in the morning, typing on my old portable with Iris asleep beside me, her presence seems as it always was, and as it always should be. I know she must once have been different, but I have no true memory of a different person.

Waking up for a peaceful second or two, she looks vaguely at the Olivetti lying on my knees, cushioned by one of her jerseys. Not long ago, when I asked if it disturbed her, she said that she liked to hear that funny noise in the morning. She must be used to it, although a couple of years ago she would have been getting up herself at this time—seven o’clock—and preparing to start her own day. Nowadays, she lies quietly asleep, sometimes giving a little grunt or murmur, and often sleeping well past nine, when I rouse and dress her. This ability to sleep like a cat, at all hours of the day and night, must be one of the rare blessings that sometimes go with Alzheimer’s, the converse of the anxiety state that comes on in wakefulness.

Most days, dressing is a reasonably happy and comic business. I am still far from sure which way round her underpants are supposed to go: we usually decide between us that it doesn’t matter. Trousers are simpler: hers have a grubby white label on the inside at the back. I ought to give her a bath, or at least a wash of some sort, since baths are tricky, but I tend to postpone it from day to day. For some reason, it is easier to do the job in cold blood, as it were, at an idle moment later in the day. Iris never objects to this; she seems in a curious way to accept it as both quite normal and wholly exceptional, as if the two concepts had merged for her. Perhaps this is why she seems to accept her daily

state as if no other had ever existed: assuming, too, that no one else would find her changed in any way; just as my memory works with her only as she is now, and—so my memory seems to assume—must always have been.

At the same time, Iris's social reflexes are, in a weird way, still very much in place. If someone comes to the door—the postman, the man to read the gas meter—she receives him with her social smile, and calls for me in those unhurried, slightly gracious tones that married couples automatically use on each other in the presence of a stranger: “Oh, I think it is the man who has come to read the meter, darling.” In the same way, she deals instinctively with more complex social situations, seeming to follow the conversation, prepared to bridge a silence by asking a question. It's usually “Where do you come from?” or “What are you doing now?”—questions that get repeated many times in the course of a social event. Other people, visitors or friends, adjust themselves well to these repetitions as soon as they grasp what is happening.

In the old days of our marriage, I would sometimes produce what in childhood used to be called “a tantrum,” if something had gone wrong or not been done properly, something for which, rightly or wrongly, I held Iris responsible. She would then become calm, reassuring, almost maternal, not as if deliberately but with some deep, unconscious, female response that normally had no need to come to the surface. Iris, in general, was never “female” at all—a fact for which I sometimes remembered to be grateful. Now I have learned to make, on occasions, a deliberate use of tantrums. If she has been following me all day, interrupting tiresome business or letter writing (very often letters to her fans), I erupt in what can seem even to me an uncontrolled fit of exasperation, stamping on the floor and throwing the papers and letters on it, waving my hands in the air. It always works. Iris says “Sorry . . . sorry,” and pats me before going quietly away. She will be back soon, but that doesn't matter. My tantrum has reassured her as no amount of caring, or calming efforts to reply to her rationally, could have done.

The lady who told me in her deliberately jolly way that living with an Alzheimer's patient was like being chained to a corpse went on to an even

greater access of desperate facetiousness. “And, as you and I know, it's a corpse that complains all the time.” I don't know it. In spite of her anxious and perpetual queries, Iris seems not to know how to complain. She never has. Alzheimer's, which can accentuate personality traits to the point of demonic parody, seems only to exaggerate the natural goodness in her.

On a good day, her need for a loving presence, mutual pattings and murmurs, has something angelic about it; she seems to become the presence found in an icon. It is more important for her still on the days of silent tears, when her grief is unconscious of that mysterious world of creation she has lost and yet is aware that something is missing.

December 25, 1997. London is uncannily silent on Christmas morning. If there are churchgoers and church bells, we see none, hear none. The silence and the emptiness seem all the better.

We walk to Kensington Gardens, up the deserted street, between the tall stucco façades falling into Edwardian decay but still handsome. Henry James lived on the left here; Browning farther up, on the right. We pass their blue plaques, set in the white walls. A few yards back, we passed the great gloomy red brick mansions where T. S. Eliot had a flat for many years. His widow must be in church now.

Our route on Christmas morning is always the same—we have been doing this for years. As we pass the spectral houses, I utter a little bit of patter like a guide. Henry James, Robert Browning, T. S. Eliot. We used to gaze up at their windows, talk a bit about them, on mornings like these. Now I just mention the names. Does Iris remember them? She smiles a little. They are still familiar, those names, as familiar as this unique morning silence. Just for this morning, those writers have laid their pens down, as Iris herself has done, and are taking a well-earned rest, looking forward to their dinners. Thackeray, the gourmet, whose house is just around the corner, would have looked forward to his with special keenness.

Now we can see the park, and beyond it the handsome Williamite façade of Kensington Palace. A few dogs here, unimpressed by Christmas but seeming merrier than usual, in contrast with the silence. There is one bell now, tolling somewhere on a sweet high note. Up in the sky, the jet trails move serenely on, their murmur fainter when it comes.

The Round Pond. Canada geese stand meditatively, for once making no demands. The same path as usual, downward, to the Serpentine. Nobody around the Peter Pan statue. Not even a Japanese couple with a camera. Young Pan himself, bronze fingers delicately crooked, his double pipe to his lips, has the sublimely sinister indifference of childhood. Captain Hook, his great enemy, was always made nervous by that pose. He considered Peter to have “good form” without knowing it, which is, of course, the best form of all. Poor Hook was in despair about this. It made Iris laugh when I told her all this, before we were married. I read a bit of the book to her. Iris, I recall, was so amused that she later put the good-form business into one of her novels.

As we walk around and admire, I tell Iris that my mother assured me that if I looked hard enough over the railings, into the private dells where the bluebells and daffodils come up in spring, I might see fairies, perhaps even Peter Pan himself. I believed her. I could almost believe her now, with the tranquil sunshine in the park making a midwinter spring, full of the illusion of flowers and fairies as well as real birdsong.

Iris is listening, which she rarely does, and smiling, too. There have been no anxious pleas this morning, no tears, none of those broken sentences whose only meaning is the dread in her voice and the demand for reassurance. Something or someone this morning has reassured her, given her, for an hour or two, what the prayer book calls “that peace which the world cannot give.”

Perhaps it is the Christmas ritual. We shall return to my brother, who has attended Matins this morning at Chelsea Old Church, where Sir Thomas More used once to worship. We shall eat sardines and sausages and scrambled eggs together, with a bottle or two of the Bulgarian red wine that goes with

everything. I shall do the eggs and sausages, with Iris standing beside me, and we shall bring the wine.

A snooze then. Iris sleeps deeply. Later, we listen to carols and Christmas music. And I have the illusion, which fortunate Alzheimer’s partners must feel at such times, that life is just the same, has never changed. I cannot imagine Iris any different. Her loss of memory becomes, in a sense, my own. In a muzzy way—the Bulgarian wine, no doubt—I find myself thinking of the Christmas birth, and also of Wittgenstein’s comment that death is not “an event in life.” We are born to live only from day to day. “Short views of human life—not further than dinner or tea.” The Reverend Sydney Smith’s advice is most easily taken during these ritualized days: the ancient saving routine of Christmas, which for us today has been twice blessed.

Life is no longer bringing the pair of us “closer and closer apart,” in A. D. Hope’s tenderly ambiguous words. Every day, we move closer and closer together. We could not do otherwise. There is a certain comic irony—happily, not darkly, comic—that, after more than forty years of our taking marriage for granted, marriage has decided it is tired of this and is taking a hand in the game. Purposefully, persistently, involuntarily, our marriage is now getting somewhere. It is giving us no choice, and I am glad of that.

Every day, we are physically closer; and Iris’s little “mouse cry,” as I think of it, signifying loneliness in the next room, the wish to be back beside me, seems less and less forlorn, more simple, more natural. She is not sailing into the dark: The voyage is over, and under the dark escort of Alzheimer’s she has arrived somewhere. So have I. ♦

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