

ALSO BY IAN McEWAN

First Love, Last Rites

In Between the Sheets

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IAN McEWAN

On Chesil Beach

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THEY WERE young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible. But it is never easy. They had just sat down to supper in a tiny sitting room on the first floor of a Georgian inn. In the next room, visible through the open door, was a four-poster bed, rather narrow, whose bedcover was pure white and stretched startlingly smooth, as though by no human hand. Edward did not mention that he had never stayed in a hotel before, whereas Florence, after many trips as a child with her father, was an old hand. Superficially, they were in fine spirits. Their wedding, at St Mary's, Oxford, had gone well; the service was decorous, the reception jolly, the send-off from school and college friends raucous and uplifting. Her parents had not condescended to his, as they had feared, and his mother had not significantly misbehaved, or completely forgotten the purpose of the occasion. The couple had driven away in a small car belonging to Florence's mother and arrived in the early evening at their hotel on the Dorset coast in weather that was not perfect for mid July or the circumstances, but

entirely adequate: it was not raining, but nor was it quite warm enough, according to Florence, to eat outside on the terrace as they had hoped. Edward thought it was, but, polite to a fault, he would not think of contradicting her on such an evening.

So they were eating in their rooms before the partially open French windows that gave onto a balcony and a view of a portion of the English Channel, and Chesil Beach with its infinite shingle. Two youths in dinner jackets served them from a trolley parked outside in the corridor, and their comings and goings through what was generally known as the honeymoon suite made the waxed oak boards squeak comically against the silence. Proud and protective, the young man watched closely for any gesture or expression that might have seemed satirical. He could not have tolerated any sniggering. But these lads from a nearby village went about their business with bowed backs and closed faces, and their manner was tentative, their hands shook as they set items down on the starched linen tablecloth. They were nervous too.

This was not a good moment in the history of English cuisine, but no one much minded at the time, except visitors from abroad. The formal meal began, as so many did then, with a slice of melon decorated by a single glazed cherry. Out in the corridor, in silver dishes on candle-heated plate warmers, waited slices of long-ago

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roasted beef in a thickened gravy, soft boiled vegetables, and potatoes of a bluish hue. The wine was from France, though no particular region was mentioned on the label, which was embellished with a solitary, darting swallow. It would not have crossed Edward's mind to order a red.

Desperate for the waiters to leave, he and Florence turned in their chairs to consider the view of a broad mossy lawn, and beyond, a tangle of flowering shrubs and trees clinging to a steep bank that descended to a lane that led to the beach. They could see the beginnings of a footpath, dropping by muddy steps, a way lined by weeds of extravagant size – giant rhubarb and cabbages they looked like, with swollen stalks more than six feet tall, bending under the weight of dark, thick-veined leaves. The garden vegetation rose up, sensuous and tropical in its profusion, an effect heightened by the grey, soft light and a delicate mist drifting in from the sea, whose steady motion of advance and withdrawal made sounds of gentle thunder, then sudden hissing against the pebbles. Their plan was to change into rough shoes after supper and walk on the shingle between the sea and the lagoon known as the Fleet, and if they had not finished the wine, they would take that along, and swig from the bottle like gentlemen of the road.

And they had so many plans, giddy plans, heaped up

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before them in the misty future, as richly tangled as the summer flora of the Dorset coast, and as beautiful. Where and how they would live, who their close friends would be, his job with her father's firm, her musical career and what to do with the money her father had given her, and how they would not be like other people, at least, not inwardly. This was still the era – it would end later in that famous decade – when to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure. Almost strangers, they stood, strangely together, on a new pinnacle of existence, gleeful that their new status promised to promote them out of their endless youth – Edward and Florence, free at last! One of their favourite topics was their childhoods, not so much the pleasures as the fog of comical misconceptions from which they had emerged, and the various parental errors and outdated practices they could now forgive.

From these new heights they could see clearly, but they could not describe to each other certain contradictory feelings: they separately worried about the moment, some time soon after dinner, when their new maturity would be tested, when they would lie down together on the four-poster bed and reveal themselves fully to one another. For over a year, Edward had been mesmerised by the prospect that on the evening of a given date in July the most

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sensitive portion of himself would reside, however briefly, within a naturally formed cavity inside this cheerful, pretty, formidably intelligent woman. How this was to be achieved without absurdity, or disappointment, troubled him. His specific worry, based on one unfortunate experience, was of over-excitement, of what he had heard someone describe as 'arriving too soon'. The matter was rarely out of his thoughts, but though his fear of failure was great, his eagerness – for rapture, for resolution – was far greater.

Florence's anxieties were more serious, and there were moments during the journey from Oxford when she thought she was about to draw on all her courage to speak her mind. But what troubled her was unutterable, and she could barely frame it for herself. Where he merely suffered conventional first-night nerves, she experienced a visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as seasickness. For much of the time, through all the months of merry wedding preparation, she managed to ignore this strain on her happiness, but whenever her thoughts turned towards a close embrace – she preferred no other term – her stomach tightened dryly, she was nauseous at the back of her throat. In a modern, forward-looking handbook that was supposed to be helpful to young brides, with its cheery tones and exclamation marks and numbered illustrations, she came across certain phrases or words that

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without a future, but forever after, this boy – John? David? Michael? – seemed to believe she owed him her friendship, and here he was again, still calling in the debt.

His pamphlet, two hundred copies of which were under his arm, set out Oxford's fate. He wanted her to help him distribute them about the town. As he leaned in she felt the scent of his hair cream wrap itself around her face. His papery skin had a jaundiced gleam in the low light, his eyes were reduced by thick lenses to narrow black slits. Florence, incapable of rudeness, settled her face into an attentive grimace. There was something fascinating about tall thin men, the way their bones and Adam's apple lurked so unconcealed beneath the skin, their bird-like faces, their predatory stoop. The crater he was describing would be half a mile across, a hundred feet deep. Because of radio-activity, Oxford would be unapproachable for ten thousand years. It began to sound like a promise of deliverance. But in fact, outside, the glorious city was exploding with the foliage of early summer, the sun was warming the treacle-coloured Cotswold stone, Christ Church Meadow would be in full splendour. Here in the hall she could see over the young man's narrow shoulder mumming figures moving about in the gloom, setting out the chairs, and then she saw Edward, coming towards her.

Many weeks later, on another hot day, they took a punt on the Cherwell, upstream to the Vicky Arms, and later

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drifted back down towards the boathouse. Along the way they parked among a clump of hawthorns and lay on the bank in deep shade, Edward on his back chewing a stalk of grass, Florence with her head resting on his arm. In a break in the conversation they listened to wavelets pattering under the boat and the muffled knock as it swung against its tree-stump mooring. Occasionally a faint breeze brought them the soothing airy sound of traffic on the Banbury Road. A thrush sang intricately, repeating each phrase with care, then gave up in the heat. Edward was working at various temporary jobs, principally as a groundsman for a cricket club. She was giving all her time to the quartet. Their hours together were not always easy to arrange, and all the more precious. This was a snatched Saturday afternoon. They knew that it was one of the last days of full-blown high summer – it was already early September, and the leaves and grasses, though still unambiguously green, had an exhausted air. The conversation had returned again to those moments, by now enriched by a private mythology, when they first set eyes on each other.

In answer to the question Edward had put several minutes before, Florence said at last, 'Because you weren't wearing a jacket.'

'What then?'

'Um. Loose white shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, tails almost hanging out ...'

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'Nonsense.'

'And grey flannel trousers with a mend in the knee, and scruffy plimsolls starting to come out at the toes. And long hair, almost over your ears.'

'What else?'

'Because you looked a bit wild, like you'd been in a fight.'

'I'd been on my bike in the morning.'

She raised herself up on one elbow to get a better view of his face, and they held each other's gaze. It was still a novel and vertiginous experience for them, to look for a minute on end into the eyes of another adult, without embarrassment or restraint. It was the closest they came, he thought, to making love. She pulled the grass stem from his mouth.

'You're such a country bumpkin.'

'Come on. What else?'

'All right. Because you stopped in the doorway and looked around at everyone as though you owned the place. Proud. No, I mean, bold.'

He laughed at this. 'But I was annoyed with myself.'

'Then you saw me,' Florence said. 'And you decided to stare me out.'

'Not true. You glanced at me and decided I wasn't worth a second look.'

She kissed him, not deeply, but teasingly, or so he

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thought. In these early days he considered there was just a small chance that she was one of those fabled girls from a nice home who would want to go all the way with him, and soon. But surely not outdoors, along this frequented stretch of river.

He drew her closer, until their noses were almost touching and their faces went dark. He said, 'So did you think then it was love at first sight?'

His tone was light-hearted and mocking, but she decided to take him seriously. The anxieties she would face were still far off, though occasionally she wondered what it was she was heading towards. A month ago they had told each other they were in love, and that was both a thrill and afterwards, for her, a cause of one night of half waking, of vague dread that she had been impetuous and let go of something important, given something away that was not really hers to give. But it was too interesting, too new, too flattering, too deeply comforting to resist, it was a liberation to be in love and say so, and she could only let herself go deeper. Now, on the riverbank in the soporific heat of one of the last days of this summer, she concentrated on that moment when he had paused at the entrance to the meeting room, and on what she had seen and felt when she looked in his direction.

To aid her memory she pulled away and straightened, and looked from his face towards the slow muddy green

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simple musical phrase, playing and repeating itself, in the shadowy ungraspable way of auditory memory, following her to the bedside, where it played again as she took a shoe in each hand. The familiar phrase – some might even have called it famous – consisted of four rising notes, which appeared to be posing a tentative question. Because the instrument was a cello rather than her violin, the interrogator was not herself but a detached observer, mildly incredulous, but insistent too, for after a brief silence and a lingering, unconvincing reply from the other instruments, the cello put the question again, in different terms, on a different chord, and then again, and again, and each time received a doubtful answer. There was no set of words she could match to these notes; it was not as if something were being said. The enquiry was without content, as pure as a question mark.

It was the opening of a Mozart quintet, the cause of some dispute between Florence and her friends because playing it had meant drafting in another viola player and the others preferred to avoid complications. But Florence insisted, she wanted someone for this piece, and when she invited a girlfriend from her corridor to join them for a rehearsal and they sight-read it through, naturally the cellist in his vanity fell for it, and soon enough the others came under its spell. Who could not? If the opening phrase posed a difficult question about the cohesion of

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the Ennismore Quartet – named after the address of the girls' hostel – it was settled by Florence's resolve in the face of opposition, one against three, and her tough-minded sense of her own good taste.

As she crossed the bedroom, still with her back to Edward, still playing for time, and carefully set her shoes down on the floor by the wardrobe, the same four notes reminded her of this other aspect of her nature. The Florence who led her quartet, who coolly imposed her will, would never meekly submit to conventional expectations. She was no lamb to be uncomplainingly knifed. Or penetrated. She would demand of herself what it was exactly she wanted and did not want from her marriage, and she would say so out loud to Edward, and expect to discover some form of compromise with him. Surely, what each of them desired should not be at the other's expense. The point was to love, and set each other free. Yes, she needed to speak up, the way she did at rehearsals, and she was going to do it now. She even had the beginnings of a proposal she might make. Her lips parted, and she drew breath. Then, at the sound of a floorboard, she turned, and he was coming towards her, smiling, his beautiful face a little pink, and the liberating idea – as if never quite her own – was gone.

Her going-away dress was of a light summer cotton in cornflower blue, a perfect match for her shoes, and discovered only after many pavement hours between Regent

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Street and Marble Arch, thankfully without her mother. When Edward drew Florence into his embrace, it was not to kiss her, but first to press her body against his, and then to put a hand on her nape and feel for the zip of this dress. His other hand was flat and firm against the small of her back, and he was whispering in her ear, so loudly, so closely that she heard only a roar of warm moist air. But the zip could not be unfastened with one hand alone, at least, not for the first inch or two. You had to hold the top of the dress straight with one hand while pulling down, otherwise the fine material would bunch and snag. She would have reached over her shoulder to help, but her arms were trapped, and besides, it did not seem right, showing him what to do. Above all, she did not wish to hurt his feelings. With a sharp sigh, he tugged harder at the zip, trying to force it, but the point had already been reached when it would move neither down nor up. For the moment, she was trapped inside her dress.

'Oh God, Flo. Just keep still, will you.'

Obediently, she froze, horrified by the agitation in his voice, automatically certain that it was her fault. It was, after all, her dress, her zip. It might have helped, she thought, to get free and turn her back, and move nearer the window for the light. But that could appear unaffectionate, and the interruption would admit to the scale of the problem. At home she relied on her sister, who was

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clever with her fingers, despite her abysmal piano playing. Their mother had no patience for small things. Poor Edward – she felt on her shoulders tremors of effort along his arms as he brought both hands into play, and she imagined his thick fingers fumbling between the folds of pinched cloth and obstinate metal. She was sorry for him, and she was a little frightened of him too. To make even a timid suggestion might enrage him further. So she stood patiently, until at last he freed himself from her with a groan and stepped back.

In fact, he was penitent. 'I'm really sorry. It's a mess. I'm so bloody clumsy.'

'Darling. It happens to me often enough.'

They went and sat together on the bed. He smiled to let her know he did not believe her, but appreciated the remark. Here in the bedroom the windows were open wide towards the same view of hotel lawn, woodland and sea. A sudden shift in wind or tide, or perhaps it was the wake of a passing ship, brought the sound of several waves breaking in succession, hard smacks against the shore. Then, just as suddenly, the waves were as before, tinkling and raking softly across the shingle.

She put her arm around his shoulder. 'Do you want to know a secret?'

'Yes.'

She took his earlobe between forefinger and thumb

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and gently tugged his head towards her and whispered, 'Actually, I'm a little bit scared.'

This was not strictly accurate but, thoughtful though she was, she could never have described her array of feelings: a dry physical sensation of tight shrinking, general revulsion at what she might be asked to do, shame at the prospect of disappointing him, and of being revealed as a fraud. She disliked herself, and when she whispered to him, she thought her words hissed in her mouth like those of a stage villain. But it was better to talk of being scared than admit to disgust or shame. She had to do everything she could to begin to lower his expectations.

He was gazing at her, and nothing registered in his expression to show he had heard her. Even in her difficult state, she marvelled at his soft brown eyes. Such kindly intelligence and forgiveness. Perhaps if she stared into them and saw nothing else, she might just be able to do anything he asked of her. She would trust him utterly. But this was fantasy.

He said at last, 'I think I am too.' As he spoke he placed his hand just above her knee, and slid along, under the hem of her dress, and came to rest on her inner thigh, with his thumb just touching her knickers. Her legs were bare and smooth, and brown from sunbathing in the garden and tennis games with old schoolfriends on the Summertown public courts and two long picnics with

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Edward on the flowery downs above the pretty village of Ewelme, where Chaucer's granddaughter was interred. They continued to look into each other's eyes – in this they were accomplished. Such was her awareness of his touch, the warmth and sticky pressure of his hand against her skin, that she could imagine, she could *see*, precisely his long, curving thumb in the blue gloom under her dress, lying patiently like a siege engine beyond the city walls, the well-trimmed nail just brushing the cream silk puckered in tiny swags along the line of the lacy trim, and touching too – she was certain of this, she felt it clearly – a stray hair curling free.

She was doing all she could to prevent a muscle in her leg from tightening, but it was happening without her, of its own accord, as inevitable and powerful as a sneeze. It was not painful as it clenched and went into mild spasm, this treacherous band of muscle, but she felt it was letting her down, giving the first indication of the extent of her problem. He surely felt the little storm beneath his hand, for his eyes widened minutely, and the tilt of his eyebrows and the soundless parting of his lips suggested that he was impressed, even in awe, as he mistook her turmoil for eagerness.

'Flo . . . ?' He said her name cautiously, on a dip and a rise, as though wanting to steady her, or dissuade her from some headlong action. But he was having to hold

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he was relieved when it began to subside. At a time, in a vast cornfield outside of which he sat at the controls of a combine harvester, he did not dare touch a single lever. He simply did not know enough. On the one hand, she was the one who had led him to the bedroom, removed her shoes with such abandon, let him place his hand so close. On the other, he knew from long experience how easily an impetuous move could wreck his chances. There again, while his hand remained in place, palpating her thigh, she continued to gaze at him so invitingly – her bold features softened, her eyes narrowing, then opening wide again to find his own, and now her head tilting back – that his caution was surely absurd. This hesitancy was a madness of his own. They were married, for goodness' sake, and she was encouraging him, urging him on, desperate for him to take the lead. But still, he could not escape the memories of those times when he had misread the signs, most spectacularly in the cinema, at the showing of *A Taste of Honey*, when she had leaped out of her seat and into the aisle like a startled gazelle. That single mistake took weeks to repair – it was a disaster he dared not repeat, and he was sceptical that a forty-minute wedding ceremony could make so profound a difference.

The air in the room seemed thin, insubstantial, and it

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was a conscious effort to breathe. He was troubled by a fit of nervous yawning, which he suppressed with a frown and a flaring of the nostrils – it would not help if she thought he was bored. It pained him tremendously that their wedding night was not simple, when their love was so obvious. He regarded his state of excitement, ignorance and indecision as dangerous because he did not trust himself. He was capable of behaving stupidly, even explosively. He was known to his university friends as one of those quiet types, prone to the occasional violent eruption. According to his father, his very early childhood had been marked by spectacular tantrums. Through his school years and into his time at college he was drawn now and then by the wild freedom of a fist fight. From schoolyard scraps round which savagely chanting kids formed a spectator ring, to a solemn rendezvous in a woodland clearing near the edge of the village, to shameless brawls outside central London pubs, Edward found in fighting a thrilling unpredictability, and discovered a spontaneous, decisive self that eluded him in the rest of his tranquil existence. He never sought out these situations, but when they arose, certain aspects – the taunting, the restraining friends, the squaring up, the sheer outrageousness of his opponent – were irresistible. Something like tunnel vision and deafness descended on him, and then suddenly he was back there again, stepping into a forgotten

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pleasure, as though emerging into a recurring dream. As in a student drinking bout, the pain came afterwards. He was no great pugilist, but he had the useful gift of physical recklessness, and was well placed to raise the stakes. He was also strong.

Florence had never seen this madness in him, and he did not intend to talk to her about it. He had not been in a fight for eighteen months, since January of 1961, in the second term of his final year. It was a one-sided affair, and unusual in that Edward had some cause, a degree of justice on his side. He was walking along Old Compton Street towards the French Pub in Dean Street with another third-year history student, Harold Mather. It was early evening and they had come straight from the library in Malet Street to meet up with friends. At Edward's grammar school, Mather would have been the perfect victim – he was short, barely five foot five, wore thick glasses over comically squashed features and was maddeningly talkative and clever. At university, however, he flourished, he was a high-status figure. He had an important jazz record collection, he edited a literary magazine, he had a short story accepted, though not yet published, by *Encounter* magazine, he was hilarious in formal Union debates and a good mimic – he did Macmillan, Gaitskill, Kennedy, Khrushchev in fake Russian, as well as various African leaders, and comedians like Al Read and Tony

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Hancock. He could reproduce all the voices and sketches from *Beyond the Fringe*, and was reckoned by far the best student in the history group. Edward counted it as progress in his own life, evidence of a new maturity, that he prized his friendship with a man he might once have taken trouble to avoid.

At that time, on a weekday winter's evening, Soho was only just coming to life. The pubs were full, but the clubs were not yet open, and the pavements were uncrowded. It was easy to notice the couple coming towards them along Old Compton Street. They were rockers – he was a big fellow in his mid-twenties, with long sideburns, strudded leather jacket, tight jeans and boots, and his plump girlfriend, holding on to his arm, was identically dressed. As they passed, and without breaking stride, the man swung his arm out to deliver a hard, flat-handed smack to the back of Mather's head which caused him to stagger, and sent his Buddy Holly glasses skidding across the road. It was an act of casual contempt for Mather's height and studious appearance, or for the fact that he looked, and was, Jewish. Perhaps it was intended to impress or amuse the girl. Edward did not stop to think about it. As he strode after the couple, he heard Harold call out something like a 'no' or a 'don't', but that was just the kind of entreaty he was now deaf to. He was back in that dream. He would have found it difficult to describe his state: his

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anger had lifted itself and spiralled into a kind of ecstasy. With his right hand he gripped the man's shoulder and spun him round, and with his left, took him by the throat and pushed him back against a wall. The man's head clunked satisfyingly against a cast iron drainpipe. Still clenching his throat, Edward hit him in the face, just once, but very hard, with a closed fist. Then he went back to help Mather find his glasses, one lens of which was cracked. They walked on, leaving the fellow sitting on the pavement, both hands covering his face, while his girlfriend fussed over him.

It took Edward some while into the evening to become aware of Harold Mather's lack of gratitude, and then of his silence, or silence towards him, and even longer, a day or two, to realise that his friend not only disapproved, but worse – he was embarrassed. In the pub neither man told their friends the story, and afterwards Mather never spoke about the incident to Edward. Rebuke would have been a relief. Without making any great show of it, Mather withdrew from him. Though they saw each other in company, and he was never obviously distant towards Edward, the friendship was never the same. Edward was in agonies when he considered that Mather was actually repelled by his behaviour, but he did not have the courage to raise the subject. Besides, Mather made sure they were never alone together. At first Edward believed that his

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error was to have damaged Mather's pride by witnessing his humiliation, which Edward then compounded by acting as his champion, demonstrating that he was tough while Mather was a vulnerable weakling. Later on, Edward realised that what he had done was simply not cool, and his shame was all the greater. Street fighting did not go with poetry and irony, bebop or history. He was guilty of a lapse of taste. He was not the person he had thought. What he believed was an interesting quirk, a rough virtue, turned out to be a vulgarity. He was a country boy, a provincial idiot who thought a bare-knuckle swipe could impress a friend. It was a mortifying reappraisal. He was making one of the advances typical of early adulthood: the discovery that there were new values by which he preferred to be judged. Since then, Edward had stayed out of fights.

But now, on his wedding night, he did not trust himself. He could not be certain that the tunnel vision and selective deafness would never descend again, enveloping him like a wintry mist on Turville Heath, obscuring his more recent, more sophisticated self. He had been sitting beside Florence, with his hand under her dress, stroking her thigh for more than a minute and a half. His painful craving was building intolerably, and he was frightened by his own savage impatience and the furious words or actions it might provoke, and so end the evening. He loved her, but he wanted to shake her awake, or slap her out of her straight-

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more important than the similarity. It was the difference between, on the one hand, a lurid and absurd fantasy devised by a post-Iron Age mystic, then embellished by his credulous medieval equivalents, and, on the other, the rational fear of a possible and terrifying event it was in our power to prevent.

In tones of crisp reprimand that effectively closed the conversation, she told him he had not quite understood her. The point was not whether the medieval cultists were wrong about the Book of Revelation and the end of the world. Of course they were wrong, but they passionately believed they were right, and they acted on their convictions. Likewise, he himself sincerely believed that nuclear weapons would destroy the world, and he acted accordingly. It was quite irrelevant that he was wrong, that the truth was that such weapons were keeping the world safe from war. This, after all, was the purpose of deterrence. Surely, as a historian, he had learned that down through the centuries mass delusions had common themes. When Edward grasped that she was likening his support for CND with membership of a millenarian sect, he politely withdrew, and they drove the last half-mile in silence. On another occasion he drove Violet to and from Cheltenham, where she gave a lecture to the sixth form at the Ladies' College on the benefits of an Oxford education.

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His own was proceeding at a pace. During that summer he ate for the first time a salad with a lemon and oil dressing and, at breakfast, yoghurt – a glamorous substance he knew only from a James Bond novel. His hard-pressed father's cooking and the pie-and-chips regime of his student days could not have prepared him for the strange vegetables – the aubergines, green and red peppers, courgettes and mangetouts – that came regularly before him. He was surprised, even a little put out, on his first visit when Violet served as a first course a bowl of undercooked peas. He had to overcome an aversion, not to the taste so much as to the reputation of garlic. Ruth giggled for minutes on end, until she had to leave the room, when he called a baguette a croissant. Early on, he made an impression on the Pontings by claiming never to have been abroad, except to Scotland to climb the three Munros of the Knoydart peninsula. He encountered for the first time in his life muesli, olives, fresh black pepper, bread without butter, anchovies, undercooked lamb, cheese that was not cheddar, ratatouille, saucisson, bouillabaisse, entire meals without potatoes, and, most challenging of all, a fishy pink paste, tarama salara. Many of these items tasted only faintly repellent, and similar to each other in some indefinable way, but he was determined not to appear unsophisticated. Sometimes, if he ate too fast, he came close to gagging.

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a week to take care of the shops. His father died at home in 1983 and was buried in Pishill churchyard, alongside his wife. Edward remained in the cottage as a tenant – his sisters were the legal owners now. Initially he used the place as a bolt-hole from Camden Town, and then in the early nineties he moved there to live alone. Physically, Turville Heath, or his corner of it, was not so very different from the place he grew up in. Instead of agricultural labourers or craftsmen for neighbours, there were commuters or owners of second homes, but all were friendly enough. And Edward would never have described himself as unhappy – among his London friends was a woman he was fond of, well into his fifties he played cricket for Turville Park, he was active in a historical society in Henley, and played a part in the restoration of the ancient watercress beds in Ewelme. Two days a month he worked for a trust based in High Wycombe that helped brain-damaged children.

Even in his sixties, a large, stout man with receding white hair and a pink, healthy face, he kept up the long hikes. His daily walk still took in the avenue of limes, and in good weather he would take a circular route to look at the wildflowers on the common at Maidensgrove or the butterflies in the nature reserve in Bix Bottom, returning through the beech woods to Pishill church, where, he thought, he too would one day be buried.

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Occasionally, he would come to a forking of the paths deep in a beech wood and idly think that this was where she must have paused to consult her map that morning in August, and he would imagine her vividly, only a few feet and forty years away, intent on finding him. Or he would pause by a view over the Stonor valley and wonder whether this was where she stopped to eat her orange. At last he could admit to himself that he had never met anyone he loved as much, that he had never found anyone, man or woman, who matched her seriousness. Perhaps if he had stayed with her, he would have been more focused and ambitious about his own life, he might have written those history books. It was not his kind of thing at all, but he knew that the Ennismore Quartet was eminent, and was still a revered feature of the classical music scene. He would never attend the concerts, or buy, or even look at, the boxed sets of Beethoven or Schubert. He did not want to see her photograph and discover what the years had wrought, or hear about the details of her life. He preferred to preserve her as she was in his memories, with the dandelion in her buttonhole and the piece of velvet in her hair, the canvas bag across her shoulder, and the beautiful strong-boned face with its wide and artless smile.

When he thought of her, it rather amazed him, that he had let that girl with her violin go. Now, of course, he saw that her self-effacing proposal was quite irrelevant.

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All she had needed was the certainty of his love, and his reassurance that there was no hurry when a lifetime lay ahead of them. Love and patience – if only he had had them both at once – would surely have seen them both through. And then what unborn children might have had their chances, what young girl with an Alice band might have become his loved familiar? This is how the entire course of a life can be changed – by doing nothing. On Chesil Beach he could have called out to Florence, he could have gone after her. He did not know, or would not have cared to know, that as she ran away from him, certain in her distress that she was about to lose him, she had never loved him more, or more hopelessly, and that the sound of his voice would have been a deliverance, and she would have turned back. Instead, he stood in cold and righteous silence in the summer's dusk, watching her hurry along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves, until she was a blurred, receding point against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light.