



VINTAGE

A SINGLE MAN

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

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About the Book

George, the middle-fiftyish English don at the Californian university, has lost his boyfriend, killed in a motor crash. He carries on with his life, making faces at the children in the nearby houses, lecturing on Aldous Huxley, gossiping [and] drinking too much... All the time he is tormented by his urges: the sight of a blond young man playing tennis, a chance meeting with one of his students, for whom George has been nursing a passion, which leads to drunken nude bathing.

About the Author

Christopher Isherwood was born in Cheshire in 1904. He began to write at university and later moved to Berlin, where he gave English lessons to support himself. He witnessed first hand the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany and some of his best works, such as *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, draw on these experiences. He created the character of Sally Bowles, later made famous as the heroine of the musical *Cabaret*. Isherwood travelled with W.H. Auden to China in the late 1930s before going with him to America, which became his home for the rest of his life. He died on 4 January 1986.

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

All the Conspirators

The Memorial

Lions and Shadows

Prater Violet

The Condor and the Cows

The World in the Evening

Down There on a Visit

Ramakrishna and His Disciples

A Meeting by the River

Kathleen and Frank

Christopher and his Kind

My Guru and his Disciple

Exhumations

Mr Norris Changes Trains

Goodbye to Berlin

With Don Bachardy

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The Ascent of F6

On the Frontier

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TO GORE VIDAL

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD
A Single Man

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A SINGLE MAN

Waking up begins with saying *am* and *now*. That which has awoken then lies for a while staring up at the ceiling and down into itself until it has recognised *I*, and therefrom deduced *I am*, *I am now*. *Here* comes next, and is at least negatively reassuring; because *here*, this morning, is where it had expected to find itself; what's called *at home*.

But *now* isn't simply now. *Now* is also a cold reminder; one whole day later than yesterday, one year later than last year. Every *now* is labelled with its date, rendering all past *nows* obsolete, until - later or sooner - perhaps - no, not perhaps - quite certainly: It will come.

Fear tweaks the vagus nerve. A sickish shrinking from what waits, somewhere out there, dead ahead.

But meanwhile the cortex, that grim disciplinarian, has taken its place at the central controls and has been testing them, one after another; the legs stretch, the lower back is arched, the fingers clench and relax. And now, over the entire intercommunication-system, is issued the first general order of the day: UP.

Obediently the body levers itself out of bed - wincing from twinges in the arthritic thumbs and the left knee, mildly nauseated by the pylorus in a state of spasm - and

shambles naked into the bathroom, where its bladder is emptied and it is weighed; still a bit over 150 pounds, in spite of all that toiling at the gym! Then to the mirror.

What it sees there isn't so much a face as the expression of a predicament. Here's what it has done to itself, here's the mess it has somehow managed to get itself into, during its fifty-eight years; expressed in terms of a dull harassed stare, a coarsened nose, a mouth dragged down by the corners into a grimace as if at the sourness of its own toxins, cheeks sagging from their anchors of muscle, a throat hanging limp in tiny wrinkled folds. The harassed look is that of a desperately tired swimmer or runner; yet there is no question of stopping. The creature we are watching will struggle on and on until it drops. Not because it is heroic. It can imagine no alternative.

Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces within its face – the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man – all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and, like fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: Look at us – we have died – what is there to be afraid of?

It answers them: But that happened so gradually, so easily. *I'm afraid of being rushed.*

It stares and stares. Its lips part. It starts to breathe through its mouth. Until the cortex orders it impatiently to wash, to shave, to brush its hair. Its nakedness has to be covered. It must be dressed up in clothes because it is going outside, into the world of the other people; and these others must be able to identify it. Its behaviour must be acceptable to them.

Obediently, it washes, shaves, brushes its hair; for it accepts its responsibilities to the others. It is even glad that it has its place among them. It knows what is expected of it.

It knows its name. It is called George.

By the time it has gotten dressed, it has become *he*; has become already more or less George – though still not the whole George they demand and are prepared to recognise. Those who call him on the phone at this hour of the morning would be bewildered, maybe even scared, if they could realise what this three-quarters-human thing is that they are talking to. But, of course, they never could – its voice's mimicry of their George is nearly perfect. Even Charlotte is taken in by it. Only two or three times has she sensed something uncanny, and asked, 'Geo – are you *all right?*'

He crosses the front room, which he calls his study, and comes down the staircase. The stairs turn a corner; they are narrow and steep. You can touch both handrails with your elbows and you have to bend your head – even if, like George, you are only five eight. This is a tightly planned little house. He often feels protected by its smallness; there is hardly room enough here to feel lonely.

Nevertheless —

Think of two people, living together day after day, year after year, in this small space, standing elbow to elbow cooking at the same small stove, squeezing past each other on the narrow stairs, shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror, constantly jogging, jostling, bumping against each other's bodies by mistake or on purpose, sensually, aggressively, awkwardly, impatiently, in rage or in love – think what deep though invisible tracks they must leave, everywhere, behind them! The doorway into the kitchen has been built too narrow. Two people in a hurry, with plates of food in their hands, are apt to keep colliding here. And it is here, nearly every morning, that George, having reached the bottom of the stairs, has this sensation of suddenly finding himself on an abrupt, brutally broken-off, jagged edge – as though the track had disappeared down a landslide. It is here that he stops short and knows,

with a sick newness, almost as though it were for the first time: Jim is dead. Is dead.

He stands quite still, silent, or at most uttering a brief animal grunt, as he waits for the spasm to pass. Then he walks into the kitchen. These morning spasms are too painful to be treated sentimentally. After them, he feels relief, merely. It is like getting over a bad attack of cramp.

Today, there are more ants, winding in column across the floor, climbing up over the sink and threatening the closet where he keeps the jams and the honey. Doggedly, he destroys them with a Flit-gun and has a sudden glimpse of himself doing this; an obstinate, malevolent old thing imposing his will upon these instructive and admirable insects. Life destroying life before an audience of objects – pots and pans, knives and forks, cans and bottles – that have no part in the kingdom of evolution. Why? Why? Is it some cosmic enemy, some arch-tyrant who tries to blind us to his very existence by setting us against our natural allies, the fellow-victims of his tyranny? But, alas, by the time George has thought all this, the ants are already dead and mopped up on a wet cloth and rinsed down the sink.

He fixes himself a plate of poached eggs, with bacon and toast and coffee, and sits down to eat them at the kitchen table. And meanwhile, around and around in his head, goes the nursery jingle his Nanny taught him when he was a child in England, all those years ago:

Poached eggs on toast are very nice—

(He sees her so plainly still, grey-haired with mouse-bright eyes, a plump little body carrying in the nursery breakfast-tray, short of breath from climbing all those stairs. She used to grumble at their steepness and call them ‘The

Wooden Mountains' – one of the magic phrases of his childhood.)

*Poached eggs on toast are very nice,
If you try them once you'll want them twice!*

Ah, the heartbreakingly insecure snugness of those nursery pleasures! Master George enjoying his eggs; Nanny watching him and smiling reassurance that all is safe in their dear tiny doomed world!

Breakfast with Jim used to be one of the best times of their day. It was then, while they were drinking their second and third cups of coffee, that they had their best talks. They talked about everything that came into their heads – including death, of course, and is there survival, and, if so, what exactly is it that survives. They even discussed the relative advantages and disadvantages of getting killed instantly and of knowing you're about to die. But now George can't for the life of him remember what Jim's views were on this. Such questions are hard to take seriously. They seem so academic.

Just suppose that the dead do revisit the living. That something approximately to be described as Jim can return to see how George is making out. Would this be at all satisfactory? Would it even be worth while? At best, surely, it would be like the brief visit of an observer from another country, who is permitted to peep in for a moment from the vast outdoors of his freedom and see, at a distance, through glass, this figure who sits solitary at the small table in the narrow room, eating his poached eggs humbly and dully, a prisoner for life?

The living-room is dark and low-ceilinged, with bookshelves all along the wall opposite the windows. These books have

not made George nobler or better or more truly wise. It is just that he likes listening to their voices, the one or the other, according to his mood. He misuses them quite ruthlessly – despite the respectful way he has to talk about them in public – to put him to sleep, to take his mind off the hands of the clock, to relax the nagging of his pyloric spasm, to gossip him out of his melancholy, to trigger the conditioned reflexes of his colon.

He takes one of them down now, and Ruskin says to him:

. . . you liked pop-guns when you were schoolboys, and rifles and Armstrongs are only the same things better made: but then the worst of it is, that what was play to you when boys, was not play to the sparrows; and what is play to you now, is not play to the small birds of State neither; and for the black eagles, you are somewhat shy of taking shots at them, if I mistake not.

Intolerable old Ruskin, always absolutely in the right, and crazy, and so cross, with his whiskers, scolding the English – he is today's perfect companion for five minutes on the toilet. George feels a bowel movement coming on with agreeable urgency, and climbs the stairs briskly to the bathroom, book in hand.

Sitting on the john, he can look out of the window. (They can see his head and shoulders from across the street, but not what he is doing.) It is a grey lukewarm California winter morning; the sky is low and soft with Pacific fog. Down at the shore, ocean and sky will be one soft sad grey. The palms stand unstirred and the oleander bushes drip moisture from their leaves.

This street is called Camphor Tree Lane. Maybe camphor trees grew here once; there are none now. More probably the name was chosen for its picturesqueness by the pioneer

escapists from dingy downtown Los Angeles and stuffy-snobbish Pasadena who came out here and founded this colony back in the early twenties. They referred to their stucco bungalows and clapboard shacks as cottages; giving them cute names like *The Fo'c'sle* and *Hi Nuff*. They called their streets lanes, ways or trails, to go with the woodsy atmosphere they wanted to create. Their utopian dream was of a subtropical English village with Montmartre manners; a Little Good Place where you could paint a bit, write a bit, and drink lots. They saw themselves as rearguard individualists, making a last-ditch stand against the twentieth century. They gave thanks loudly from morn till eve that they had escaped the soul-destroying commercialism of the city. They were tacky and cheerful and defiantly bohemian; tirelessly inquisitive about each other's doings, and boundlessly tolerant. When they fought, at least it was with fists and bottles and furniture, not lawyers. Most of them were lucky enough to have died off before the Great Change.

The Change began in the late forties, when the world-war-two vets came swarming out of the East with their just-married wives, in search of new and better breeding-grounds in the sunny Southland, which had been their last nostalgic glimpse of Home before they shipped out to the Pacific. And what better breeding-ground than a hillside neighbourhood like this one, only five minutes' walk from the beach and with no through traffic to decimate the future tots? So, one by one, the cottages which used to reek of bathtub gin and reverberate with the poetry of Hart Crane have fallen to the occupying army of coke-drinking television-watchers.

The vets themselves, no doubt, would have adjusted pretty well to the original bohemian utopia; maybe some of them would even have taken to painting or writing between hangovers. But their wives explained to them, right from the start and in the very clearest language, that breeding