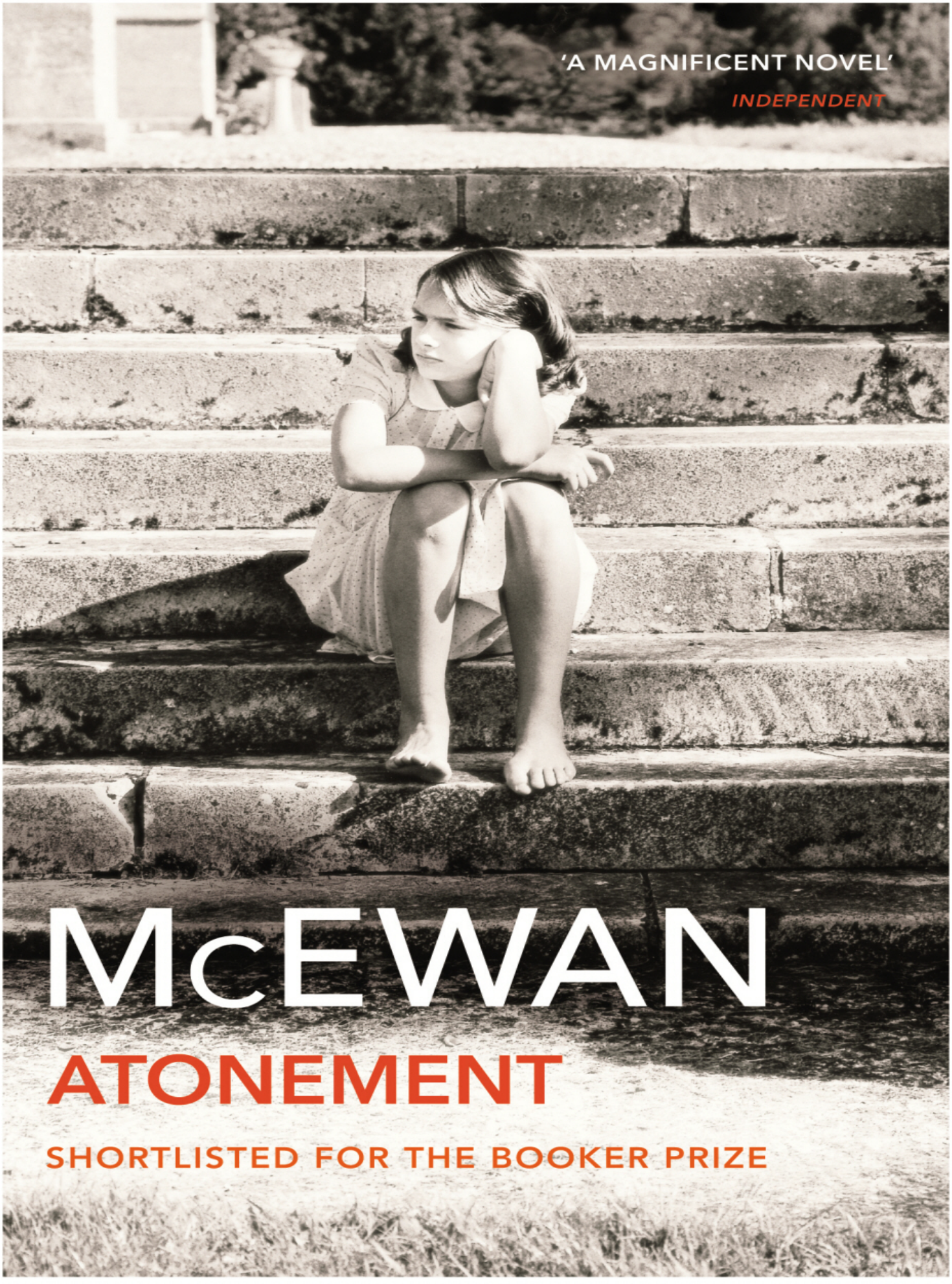
'A MAGNIFICENT NOVEL'
INDEPENDENT
McEWAN
ATONEMENT
SHORTLISTED FOR THE BOOKER PRIZE

Contents

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About the Book

On the hottest day of the summer of 1935, thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis sees her sister Cecilia strip off her clothes and plunge into the fountain in the garden of their country house. Watching her too is Robbie Turner who, like Cecilia, has recently come down from Cambridge. By the end of that day, the lives of all three will have been changed for ever, as Briony commits a crime for which she will spend the rest of her life trying to atone.

About the Author

Ian McEwan is a critically acclaimed author of short stories and novels for adults, as well as *The Daydreamer*, a children's novel illustrated by Anthony Browne. His first published work, a collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*, won the Somerset Maugham Award. His novels include *The Child in Time*, which won the 1987 Whitbread Novel of the Year Award, *The Cement Garden*, *Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam*, which won the 1998 Booker Prize, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *On Chesil Beach*, *Solar*, *Sweet Tooth* and *The Children Act*.

Also by Ian McEwan

First Love, Last Rites
In Between the Sheets
The Cement Garden
The Comfort of Strangers
The Child in Time
The Innocent
Black Dogs
The Daydreamer
Enduring Love
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TO ANNALENA

IAN McEWAN

Atonement

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

‘Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?’

They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her own room.

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

Part One

One

THE PLAY – FOR which Briony had designed the posters, programmes and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper – was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch. When the preparations were complete, she had nothing to do but contemplate her finished draft and wait for the appearance of her cousins from the distant north. There would be time for only one day of rehearsal before her brother arrived. At some moments chilling, at others desperately sad, the play told a tale of the heart whose message, conveyed in a rhyming prologue, was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed. The reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera during an impetuous dash towards a seaside town with her intended. Deserted by him and nearly everybody else, bed-bound in a garret, she discovers in herself a sense of humour. Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor – in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy. Healed by him, Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on ‘a windy sunlit day in spring’.

Mrs Tallis read the seven pages of *The Trials of Arabella* in her bedroom, at her dressing table, with the author’s arm around her shoulder the whole while. Briony studied her mother’s face for every trace of shifting emotion, and Emily Tallis obliged with looks of alarm, snickers of glee and, at the end, grateful smiles and wise, affirming nods. She took her

daughter in her arms, onto her lap – ah, that hot smooth little body she remembered from its infancy, and still not gone from her, not quite yet – and said that the play was ‘stupendous’, and agreed instantly, murmuring into the tight whorl of the girl’s ear, that this word could be quoted on the poster which was to be on an easel in the entrance hall by the ticket booth.

Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project’s highest point of fulfilment. Nothing came near it for satisfaction, all else was dreams and frustration. There were moments in the summer dusk after her light was out, burrowing in the delicious gloom of her canopy bed, when she made her heart thud with luminous, yearning fantasies, little playlets in themselves, every one of which featured Leon. In one, his big, good-natured face buckled in grief as Arabella sank in loneliness and despair. In another, there he was, cocktail in hand at some fashionable city watering hole, overheard boasting to a group of friends: Yes, my younger sister, Briony Tallis the writer, you must surely have heard of her. In a third he punched the air in exultation as the final curtain fell, although there was no curtain, there was no possibility of a curtain. Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, towards the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony’s services as a bridesmaid.

She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so. Whereas her big sister’s room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony’s was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way – towards their owner – as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled. In fact,

Briony’s was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table – cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice – suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen’s army awaiting orders.

A taste for the miniature was one aspect of an orderly spirit. Another was a passion for secrets: in a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention. In a toy safe opened by six secret numbers she stored letters and postcards. An old tin petty cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years, to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant double acorn, fool’s gold, a rain-making spell bought at a funfair, a squirrel’s skull as light as a leaf.

But hidden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets. Her wish for a harmonious, organised world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have it in her to be cruel. Her effective status as an only child, as well as the relative isolation of the Tallis house, kept her, at least during the long summer holidays, from girlish intrigues with friends. Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding; no one knew about the squirrel’s skull beneath her bed, but no one wanted to know. None of this was particularly an affliction; or rather, it appeared so only in retrospect, once a solution had been found.

At the age of eleven she wrote her first story – a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folk tales and lacking, she

realised later, that vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compels a reader's respect. But this first clumsy attempt showed her that the imagination itself was a source of secrets: once she had begun a story, no one could be told. Pretending in words was too tentative, too vulnerable, too embarrassing to let anyone know. Even writing out the *she said*s, the *and then*s, made her wince, and she felt foolish, appearing to know about the emotions of an imaginary being. Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What other authority could she have? Only when a story was finished, all fates resolved and the whole matter sealed off at both ends so it resembled, at least in this one respect, every other finished story in the world, could she feel immune, and ready to punch holes in the margins, bind the chapters with pieces of string, paint or draw the cover, and take the finished work to show to her mother, or her father, when he was home.

Her efforts received encouragement. In fact, they were welcomed as the Tallises began to understand that the baby of the family possessed a strange mind and a facility with words. The long afternoons she spent browsing through dictionary and thesaurus made for constructions that were inept, but hauntingly so: the coins a villain concealed in his pocket were 'esoteric', a hoodlum caught stealing a car wept in 'shameless auto-exculpation', the heroine on her thoroughbred stallion made a 'cursory' journey through the night, the king's furrowed brow was the 'hieroglyph' of his displeasure. Briony was encouraged to read her stories aloud in the library and it surprised her parents and older sister to hear their quiet girl perform so boldly, making big gestures with her free arm, arching her eyebrows as she did the voices, and looking up from the page for seconds at a time as she read in order to gaze into one face after the

other, unapologetically demanding her family's total attention as she cast her narrative spell.

Even without their attention and praise and obvious pleasure, Briony could not have been held back from her writing. In any case, she was discovering, as had many writers before her, that not all recognition is helpful. Cecilia's enthusiasm, for example, seemed a little overstated, tainted with condescension perhaps, and intrusive too; her big sister wanted each bound story catalogued and placed on the library shelves, between Rabindranath Tagore and Quintus Tertullian. If this was supposed to be a joke, Briony ignored it. She was on course now, and had found satisfaction on other levels; writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturisation. A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm. The childhood of a spoiled prince could be framed within half a page, a moonlit dash through sleepy villages was one rhythmically emphatic sentence, falling in love could be achieved in a single word – a *glance*. The pages of a recently finished story seemed to vibrate in her hand with all the life they contained. Her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so. A crisis in a heroine's life could be made to coincide with hailstones, gales and thunder, whereas nuptials were generally blessed with good light and soft breezes. A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping, the former being set aside exclusively for the morally dubious, the latter a reward withheld until the final page.

The play she had written for Leon's homecoming was her first excursion into drama, and she had found the transition quite effortless. It was a relief not to be writing out the *she said*s, or describing the weather or the onset of spring or her heroine's face – beauty, she had discovered, occupied a narrow band. Ugliness, on the other hand, had infinite

variation. A universe reduced to what was said in it was tidiness indeed, almost to the point of nullity, and to compensate, every utterance was delivered at the extremity of some feeling or other, in the service of which the exclamation mark was indispensable. *The Trials of Arabella* may have been a melodrama, but its author had yet to hear the term. The piece was intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief and instruction, in that order, and the innocent intensity with which Briony set about the project – the posters, tickets, sales booth – made her particularly vulnerable to failure. She could easily have welcomed Leon with another of her stories, but it was the news that her cousins from the north were coming to stay that had prompted this leap into a new form.

That Lola, who was fifteen, and the nine-year-old twins, Jackson and Pierrot, were refugees from a bitter domestic civil war should have mattered more to Briony. She had heard her mother criticise the impulsive behaviour of her younger sister Hermione, and lament the situation of the three children, and denounce her meek, evasive brother-in-law Cecil who had fled to the safety of All Souls College, Oxford. Briony had heard her mother and sister analyse the latest twists and outrages, charges and counter charges, and she knew her cousins' visit was an open-ended one, and might even extend into term time. She had heard it said that the house could easily absorb three children, and that the Quinceys could stay as long as they liked, provided the parents, if they ever visited simultaneously, kept their quarrels away from the Tallis household. Two rooms near Briony's had been dusted down, new curtains had been hung and furniture carried in from other rooms. Normally, she would have been involved in these preparations, but they happened to coincide with her two-day writing bout and the beginnings of the front-of-house construction. She vaguely knew that divorce was an affliction, but she did not

regard it as a proper subject, and gave it no thought. It was a mundane unravelling that could not be reversed, and therefore offered no opportunities to the storyteller: it belonged in the realm of disorder. Marriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its formal neatness of virtue rewarded, the thrill of its pageantry and banqueting, and dizzy promise of lifelong union. A good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthinkable – sexual bliss. In the aisles of country churches and grand city cathedrals, witnessed by a whole society of approving family and friends, her heroines and heroes reached their innocent climaxes and needed to go no further.

If divorce had presented itself as the dastardly antithesis of all this, it could easily have been cast onto the other pan of the scales, along with betrayal, illness, thieving, assault and mendacity. Instead it showed an unglamorous face of dull complexity and incessant wrangling. Like re-armament and the Abyssinia Question and gardening, it was simply not a subject, and when, after a long Saturday morning wait, Briony heard at last the sound of wheels on the gravel below her bedroom window, and snatched up her pages and ran down the stairs, across the hallway and out into the blinding light of midday, it was not insensitivity so much as a highly focused artistic ambition that caused her to shout to the dazed young visitors huddled together by the trap with their luggage, ‘I’ve got your parts, all written out. First performance tomorrow! Rehearsals start in five minutes!’

Immediately, her mother and sister were there to interpose a blander timetable. The visitors – all three were ginger-haired and freckled – were shown their rooms, their cases were carried up by Hardman’s son Danny, there was cordial in the kitchen, a tour of the house, a swim in the pool and lunch in the south garden, under the shade of the vines. All the while, Emily and Cecilia Tallis maintained a patter that surely robbed the guests of the ease it was supposed to confer. Briony knew that if she had travelled two hundred

miles to a strange house, bright questions and jokey asides, and being told in a hundred different ways that she was free to choose, would have oppressed her. It was not generally realised that what children mostly wanted was to be left alone. However, the Quinceys worked hard at pretending to be amused or liberated, and this boded well for *The Trials of Arabella*: this trio clearly had the knack of being what they were not, even though they barely resembled the characters they were to play. Before lunch Briony slipped away to the empty rehearsal room – the nursery – and walked up and down on the painted floorboards, considering her casting options.

On the face of it, Arabella, whose hair was as dark as Briony's, was unlikely to be descended from freckled parents, or elope with a foreign freckled count, rent a garret room from a freckled innkeeper, lose her heart to a freckled prince and be married by a freckled vicar before a freckled congregation. But all this was to be so. Her cousins' colouring was too vivid – virtually fluorescent! – to be concealed. The best that could be said was that Arabella's *lack* of freckles was the sign – the hieroglyph, Briony might have written – of her distinction. Her purity of spirit would never be in doubt, though she moved through a blemished world. There was a further problem with the twins, who could not be told apart by a stranger. Was it right that the wicked count should so completely resemble the handsome prince, or that both should resemble Arabella's father *and* the vicar? What if Lola were cast as the prince? Jackson and Pierrot seemed typical eager little boys who would probably do as they were told. But would their sister play a man? She had green eyes and sharp bones in her face, and hollow cheeks, and there was something brittle in her reticence that suggested strong will and a temper easily lost. Merely floating the possibility of the role to Lola might provoke a crisis, and could Briony really hold hands with her before the

altar, while Jackson intoned from the *Book of Common Prayer*?

It was not until five o'clock that afternoon that she was able to assemble her cast in the nursery. She had arranged three stools in a row, while she herself jammed her rump into an ancient baby's high-chair – a bohemian touch that gave her a tennis umpire's advantage of height. The twins had come with reluctance from the pool where they had been for three hours without a break. They were barefoot and wore singlets over trunks that dripped onto the floorboards. Water also ran down their necks from their matted hair, and both boys were shivering and jiggled their knees to keep warm. The long immersion had puckered and bleached their skin, so that in the relatively low light of the nursery their freckles appeared black. Their sister, who sat between them, with left leg balanced on right knee, was, by contrast, perfectly composed, having liberally applied perfume and changed into a green gingham frock to offset her colouring. Her sandals revealed an ankle bracelet and toenails painted vermilion. The sight of these nails gave Briony a constricting sensation around her sternum, and she knew at once that she could not ask Lola to play the prince.

Everyone was settled and the playwright was about to begin her little speech summarising the plot and evoking the excitement of performing before an adult audience tomorrow evening in the library. But it was Pierrot who spoke first.

'I hate plays and all that sort of thing.'

'I hate them too, and dressing up,' Jackson said.

It had been explained at lunch that the twins were to be distinguished by the fact that Pierrot was missing a triangle of flesh from his left ear lobe on account of a dog he had tormented when he was three.

Lola looked away. Briony said reasonably, 'How can you hate plays?'

‘It’s just showing off.’ Pierrot shrugged as he delivered this self-evident truth.

Briony knew he had a point. This was precisely why she loved plays, or hers at least; everyone would adore her. Looking at the boys, under whose chairs water was pooling before spilling between the floorboard cracks, she knew they could never understand her ambition. Forgiveness softened her tone.

‘Do you think Shakespeare was just showing off?’

Pierrot glanced across his sister’s lap towards Jackson. This warlike name was faintly familiar, with its whiff of school and adult certainty, but the twins found their courage in each other.

‘Everyone knows he was.’

‘Definitely.’

When Lola spoke, she turned first to Pierrot and halfway through her sentence swung round to finish on Jackson. In Briony’s family, Mrs Tallis never had anything to impart that needed saying simultaneously to both daughters. Now Briony saw how it was done.

‘You’ll be in this play, or you’ll get a clout, and then I’ll speak to The Parents.’

‘If you clout us, *we’ll* speak to The Parents.’

‘You’ll be in this play or I’ll speak to The Parents.’

That the threat had been negotiated neatly downwards did not appear to diminish its power. Pierrot sucked on his lower lip.

‘Why do we have to?’ Everything was conceded in the question, and Lola tried to ruffle his sticky hair.

‘Remember what The Parents said? We’re guests in this house and we make ourselves – what do we make ourselves? Come on. What do we make ourselves?’

‘A-menable,’ the twins chorused in misery, barely stumbling over the unusual word.

Lola turned to Briony and smiled. ‘Please tell us about your play.’

The Parents. Whatever institutionalised strength was locked in this plural was about to fly apart, or had already done so, but for now it could not be acknowledged, and bravery was demanded of even the youngest. Briony felt suddenly ashamed at what she had selfishly begun, for it had never occurred to her that her cousins would not want to play their parts in *The Trials of Arabella*. But they had trials, a catastrophe of their own, and now, as guests in her house, they believed themselves under an obligation. What was worse, Lola had made it clear that she too would be acting on sufferance. The vulnerable Quinceys were being coerced. And yet, Briony struggled to grasp the difficult thought, wasn't there manipulation here, wasn't Lola using the twins to express something on her behalf, something hostile or destructive? Briony felt the disadvantage of being two years younger than the other girl, of having a full two years' refinement weigh against her, and now her play seemed a miserable, embarrassing thing.

Avoiding Lola's gaze the whole while, she proceeded to outline the plot, even as its stupidity began to overwhelm her. She no longer had the heart to invent for her cousins the thrill of the first night.

As soon as she was finished Pierrot said, 'I want to be the count. I want to be a bad person.'

Jackson said simply, 'I'm a prince. I'm always a prince.'

She could have drawn them to her and kissed their little faces, but she said, 'That's all right then.'

Lola uncrossed her legs, smoothed her dress and stood, as though about to leave. She spoke through a sigh of sadness or resignation. 'I suppose that because you're the one who wrote it, you'll be Arabella …'

'Oh no,' Briony said. 'No. Not at all.'

She said no, but she meant yes. Of course she was taking the part of Arabella. What she was objecting to was Lola's 'because'. She was not playing Arabella because she wrote the play, she was taking the part because no other

possibility had crossed her mind, because that was how Leon was to see her, because she *was* Arabella.

But she had said no, and now Lola was saying sweetly, ‘In that case, do you mind if I play her? I think I could do it very well. In fact, of the two of us …’

She let that hang, and Briony stared at her, unable to keep the horror from her expression, and unable to speak. It was slipping away from her, she knew, but there was nothing that she could think of to say that would bring it back. Into Briony’s silence, Lola pressed her advantage.

‘I had a long illness last year, so I could do that part of it well too.’

Too? Briony could not keep up with the older girl. The misery of the inevitable was clouding her thoughts.

One of the twins said proudly, ‘And you were in the school play.’

How could she tell them that Arabella was not a freckled person? Her skin was pale and her hair was black and her thoughts were Briony’s thoughts. But how could she refuse a cousin so far from home whose family life was in ruins? Lola was reading her mind because she now played her final card, the unrefusable ace.

‘Do say yes. It would be the only good thing that’s happened to me in *months*.’

Yes. Unable to push her tongue against the word, Briony could only nod, and felt as she did so a sulky thrill of self-annihilating compliance spreading across her skin and ballooning outwards from it, darkening the room in throbs. She wanted to leave, she wanted to lie alone, face-down on her bed and savour the vile piquancy of the moment, and go back down the lines of branching consequences to the point before the destruction began. She needed to contemplate with eyes closed the full richness of what she had lost, what she had given away, and to anticipate the new regime. Not only Leon to consider, but what of the antique peach and cream satin dress that her mother was looking out for her,

for Arabella’s wedding? That would now be given to Lola. How could her mother reject the daughter who had loved her all these years? As she saw the dress make its perfect, clinging fit around her cousin and witnessed her mother’s heartless smile, Briony knew her only reasonable choice then would be to run away, to live under hedges, eat berries and speak to no one, and be found by a bearded woodsman one winter’s dawn, curled up at the base of a giant oak, beautiful and dead, and barefoot, or perhaps wearing the ballet pumps with the pink ribbon straps …

Self-pity needed her full attention, and only in solitude could she breathe life into the lacerating details, but at the instant of her assent – how the tilt of a skull could change a life! – Lola had picked up the bundle of Briony’s manuscript from the floor, and the twins had slipped from their chairs to follow their sister into the space in the centre of the nursery that Briony had cleared the day before. Did she dare leave now? Lola was pacing the floorboards, one hand to her brow as she skimmed through the first pages of the play, muttering the lines from the prologue. She announced that nothing was to be lost by beginning at the beginning, and now she was casting her brothers as Arabella’s parents and describing the opening to them, seeming to know all there was to know about the scene. The advance of Lola’s dominion was merciless and made self-pity irrelevant. Or would it be all the more annihilatingly delicious? – for Briony had not even been cast as Arabella’s mother, and now was surely the time to sidle from the room and tumble into face-down darkness on the bed. But it was Lola’s briskness, her obliviousness to anything beyond her own business, and Briony’s certainty that her own feelings would not even register, still less provoke guilt, which gave her the strength to resist.

In a generally pleasant and well-protected life, she had never really confronted anyone before. Now she saw: it was like diving into the swimming pool in early June; you simply

had to make yourself do it. As she squeezed out of the high-chair and walked over to where her cousin stood her heart thudded inconveniently and her breath was short.

She took the play from Lola and said in a voice that was constricted and more high-pitched than usual, ‘If you’re Arabella, then I’ll be the director, thank you very much, and I’ll read the prologue.’

Lola put her speckled hand to her mouth. ‘Sor-reeee!’ she hooted. ‘I was just trying to get things started.’

Briony was unsure how to respond, so she turned to Pierrot and said, ‘You don’t look much like Arabella’s mother.’

The countermanding of Lola’s casting decision, and the laughter in the boys it provoked, made for a shift in the balance of power. Lola made an exaggerated shrug of her bony shoulders and went to stare out of the window. Perhaps she herself was struggling with the temptation to flounce from the room.

Though the twins began a wrestling match, and their sister suspected the onset of a headache, somehow the rehearsal began. The silence into which Briony read the prologue was tense.

> This is the tale of spontaneous Arabella
> Who ran off with an extrinsic fellow.
> It grieved her parents to see their first born
> Evanesce from her home to go to Eastbourne
> Without permission …

His wife at his side, Arabella’s father stood at the wrought-iron gates of his estate, first pleading with his daughter to reconsider her decision, then in desperation ordering her not to go. Facing him was the sad but stubborn heroine with the count beside her, and their horses, tethered to a nearby oak, were neighing and pawing the ground, impatient to be

off. The father’s tenderest feelings were supposed to make his voice quaver as he said,

> My darling one, you are young and lovely,
> But inexperienced, and though you think
> The world is at your feet,
> It can rise up and tread on you.

Briony positioned her cast; she herself clutched Jackson’s arm, Lola and Pierrot stood several feet away, hand in hand. When the boys met each other’s eye they had a giggling fit which the girls shushed at. There had been trouble enough already, but Briony began to understand the chasm that lay between an idea and its execution only when Jackson began to read from his sheet in a stricken monotone, as though each word was a name on a list of dead people, and was unable to pronounce ‘inexperienced’ even though it was said for him many times, and left out the last two words of his lines – ‘it can rise up and tread’. As for Lola, she spoke her lines correctly but casually, and sometimes smiled inappropriately at some private thought, determined to demonstrate that her nearly adult mind was elsewhere.

And so they went on, the cousins from the north, for a full half an hour, steadily wrecking Briony’s creation, and it was a mercy, therefore, when her big sister came to fetch the twins for their bath.

Two

PARTLY BECAUSE OF her youth and the glory of the day, partly because of her blossoming need for a cigarette, Cecilia Tallis half ran with her flowers along the path that went by the river, by the old diving pool with its mossy brick wall, before curving away through the oak woods. The accumulated inactivity of the summer weeks since finals also hurried her along; since coming home, her life had stood still, and a fine day like this made her impatient, almost desperate.

The cool high shade of the woods was a relief, the sculpted intricacies of the tree trunks enchanting. Once through the iron kissing gate, and past the rhododendrons beneath the ha-ha, she crossed the open parkland – sold off to a local farmer to graze his cows on – and came up behind the fountain and its retaining wall and the half-scale reproduction of Bernini's *Triton* in the Piazza Barberini in Rome.

The muscular figure, squatting so comfortably on his shell, could blow through his conch a jet only two inches high, the pressure was so feeble, and water fell back over his head, down his stone locks and along the groove of his powerful spine, leaving a glistening dark green stain. In an alien northern climate he was a long way from home, but he was beautiful in morning sunlight, and so were the four dolphins that supported the wavy-edged shell on which he sat. She looked at the improbable scales on the dolphins and on the Triton's thighs, and then towards the house. Her quickest way into the drawing room was across the lawn and terrace and through the French windows. But her childhood friend and university acquaintance, Robbie Turner, was on his knees, weeding along a rugosa hedge, and she did not feel like getting into conversation with him. Or at least, not now.

Since coming down, landscape gardening was his last craze but one. Now there was talk of medical college, which after a literature degree seemed rather pretentious. And presumptuous too, since it was her father who would have to pay.

She refreshed the flowers by plunging them into the fountain's basin, which was full-scale, deep and cold, and avoided Robbie by hurrying round to the front of the house – it was an excuse, she thought, to stay outside another few minutes. Morning sunlight, or any light, could not conceal the ugliness of the Tallis home – barely forty years old, bright orange brick, squat, lead-paned baronial Gothic, to be condemned one day in an article by Pevsner, or one of his team, as a tragedy of wasted chances, and by a younger writer of the modern school as 'charmless to a fault'. An Adam-style house had stood here until destroyed by fire in the late 1880s. What remained was the artificial lake and island with its two stone bridges supporting the driveway, and, by the water's edge, a crumbling stuccoed temple. Cecilia's grandfather, who grew up over an ironmonger's shop and made the family fortune with a series of patents on padlocks, bolts, latches and hasps, had imposed on the new house his taste for all things solid, secure and functional. Still, if one turned one's back to the front entrance and glanced down the drive, ignoring the Friesians already congregating in the shade of widely spaced trees, the view was fine enough, giving an impression of timeless, unchanging calm which made her more certain than ever that she must soon be moving on.

She went indoors, quickly crossed the black and white tiled hall – how familiar her echoing steps, how annoying – and paused to catch her breath in the doorway of the drawing room. Dripping coolly onto her sandalled feet, the untidy bunch of rose-bay willow-herb and irises brought her to a better state of mind. The vase she was looking for was on an American cherry-wood table by the French windows

which were slightly ajar. Their south-east aspect had permitted parallelograms of morning sunlight to advance across the powder-blue carpet. Her breathing slowed and her desire for a cigarette deepened, but still she hesitated by the door, momentarily held by the perfection of the scene – by the three faded Chesterfields grouped around the almost new Gothic fireplace in which stood a display of wintry sedge, by the unplayed, untuned harpsichord and the unused rosewood music stands, by the heavy velvet curtains, loosely restrained by an orange and blue tasselled rope, framing a partial view of cloudless sky and the yellow and grey mottled terrace where camomile and feverfew grew between the paving cracks. A set of steps led down to the lawn on whose border Robbie still worked, and which extended to the Triton fountain fifty yards away.

All this – the river and flowers, running, which was something she rarely did these days, the fine ribbing of the oak trunks, the high-ceilinged room, the geometry of light, the pulse in her ears subsiding in the stillness – all this pleased her as the familiar was transformed into a delicious strangeness. But she also felt reproved for her homebound boredom. She had returned from Cambridge with a vague notion that her family was owed an uninterrupted stretch of her company. But her father remained in town, and her mother, when she wasn't nurturing her migraines, seemed distant, even unfriendly. Cecilia had carried up trays of tea to her mother's room – as spectacularly squalid as her own – thinking some intimate conversations might develop. However, Emily Tallis wanted to share only tiny frets about the household, or she lay back against the pillows, her expression unreadable in the gloom, emptying her cup in wan silence. Briony was lost to her writing fantasies – what had seemed a passing fad was now an enveloping obsession. Cecilia had seen them on the stairs that morning, her younger sister leading the cousins, poor things, who had arrived only yesterday, up to the nursery to rehearse the

play Briony wanted to put on that evening, when Leon and his friend were expected. There was so little time, and already one of the twins had been detained by Betty in the scullery for some wrongdoing or other. Cecilia was not inclined to help – it was too hot, and whatever she did, the project would end in calamity, with Briony expecting too much, and no one, especially the cousins, able to measure up to her frenetic vision.

Cecilia knew she could not go on wasting her days in the stews of her untidied room, lying on her bed in a haze of smoke, chin propped on her hand, pins and needles spreading up through her arm as she read her way through Richardson's *Clarissa*. She had made a half-hearted start on a family tree, but on the paternal side, at least until her great-grandfather opened his humble hardware shop, the ancestors were irretrievably sunk in a bog of farm labouring, with suspicious and confusing changes of surnames among the men, and common-law marriages unrecorded in the parish registers. She could not remain here, she knew she should make plans, but she did nothing. There were various possibilities, all equally unpressing. She had a little money in her account, enough to keep her modestly for a year or so. Leon repeatedly invited her to spend time with him in London. University friends were offering to help her find a job – a dull one certainly, but she would have her independence. She had interesting uncles and aunts on her mother's side who were always happy to see her, including wild Hermione, mother of Lola and the boys, who even now was over in Paris with a lover who worked in the wireless.

No one was holding Cecilia back, no one would care particularly if she left. It wasn't torpor that kept her – she was often restless to the point of irritability. She simply liked to feel that she was prevented from leaving, that she was needed. From time to time she persuaded herself she remained for Briony's sake, or to help her mother, or because this really was her last sustained period at home

and she would see it through. In fact, the thought of packing a suitcase and taking the morning train did not excite her. Leaving for leaving's sake. Lingering here, bored and comfortable, was a form of self-punishment tinged with pleasure, or the expectation of it; if she went away something bad might happen or, worse, something good, something she could not afford to miss. And there was Robbie, who exasperated her with his affectation of distance, and his grand plans which he would only discuss with her father. They had known each other since they were seven, she and Robbie, and it bothered her that they were awkward when they talked. Even though she felt it was largely his fault – could his first have gone to his head? – she knew this was something she must clear up before she thought of leaving.

Through the open windows came the faint leathery scent of cow dung, always present except on the coldest days, and noticeable only to those who had been away. Robbie had put down his trowel and stood to roll a cigarette, a hangover from his Communist Party time – another abandoned fad, along with his ambitions in anthropology, and the planned hike from Calais to Istanbul. Still, her own cigarettes were two flights up, in one of several possible pockets.

She advanced into the room, and thrust the flowers into the vase. It had once belonged to her Uncle Clem, whose funeral, or re-burial, at the end of the war she remembered quite well: the gun carriage arriving at the country churchyard, the coffin draped in the regimental flag, the raised swords, the bugle at the graveside, and, most memorably for a five-year-old, her father weeping. Clem was his only sibling. The story of how he had come by the vase was told in one of the last letters the young lieutenant wrote home. He was on liaison duties in the French sector and initiated a last-minute evacuation of a small town west of Verdun before it was shelled. Perhaps fifty women,