FIRST LOVE LAST RITES

McEWAN

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About the Book

Taut, brooding and densely atmospheric, these stories show us the ways in which murder can arise out of boredom, perversity can result from adolescent curiosity, and sheer evil might be the solution to unbearable loneliness.

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

In Between the Sheets
The Cement Garden
The Comfort of Strangers
The Child in Time
The Innocent
Black Dogs
The Daydreamer
Enduring Love
Amsterdam
Atonement
Saturday
On Chesil Beach
Solar
Sweet Tooth
The Children Act

TO JOHN WEBB

IAN MCEWAN

First Love,
Last Rites

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

In 1970, when I was twenty-two, I moved to Norwich and lodged in a small, pleasant room on the edge of the city. I had come to do an MA in English at the University of East Anglia, but my overriding purpose was to write fiction. At the end of my first week, with all arrangements made, I sat down at a card table by the end of my bed one evening and told myself that I would work continuously through the night until I had completed an entire short story. I had no notes, only a scrap, a dreamy notion of what sort of story this would be.

Within an hour, a strange voice was talking to me from the page. I let it speak. I worked on into the night, filled with a romantic sense of myself, the writer heroically driven by a compelling idea, pushing on towards dawn as the city slept. I finished around six o'clock.

The story was called 'Conversation with a Cupboard Man', one of a handful I wrote that year that went into my first book, *First Love, Last Rites*, published in 1975. Its narrator was a man who didn't want to grow up – a strange choice for me because I considered myself that year to have finally reached adult independence. Being in Norwich was the first major decision I'd taken in my life without reference to or advice from anyone else. I wanted a fresh start after undergraduate life. I regarded myself as a full-time committed writer. An MA was what I could do in my spare time. An academic grant would support me.

Other strange voices, other weird or wretched characters, surfaced in that year to haunt or infest my fiction. Violent, sexually perverse, lonely, they were remote from the life I was living in Norwich at the time. I was meeting many new friends, falling in love, keenly reading contemporary American fiction, hiking the North Norfolk coast, had taken a hallucinogenic drug in the countryside and been amazed –

and yet whenever I returned to my notebook or typewriter, a savage, dark impulse took hold of me. Sibling incest, cross-dressing, a rat that torments young lovers, actors making love mid-rehearsal, children roasting a cat, child abuse and murder, a man who keeps a penis in a jar and uses esoteric geometry to obliterate his wife – however dark the stories were, I also thought elements in them were hilarious. Sometimes I persuaded myself I was some kind of wild man, a *fauviste*, kicking against the bourgeois divorce novel that people complained about.

Forty years on from the publication of that little volume of stories, I'm bound to have a different view. Of course, English literary culture in 1970 was far more diverse than the so-called Hampstead divorce novel. The recent 'missing Booker' shortlist was powerful proof of that. Besides, divorce is a rich subject, Hampstead a legitimate place. Up until my arrival in Norwich I'd been an intense, somewhat shy or reserved child and teenager. I hadn't caused much trouble, had uncomplainingly passed through the educational mill, and come to sex and drugs later than most – respectively, at eighteen and twenty-one. Fiction was part of a genial explosion in my life, of a sense that with my formal education more or less over, I could do whatever I wanted.

And as far as I was concerned, fiction was synonymous with freedom. The legal struggles to publish Joyce's *Ulysses*, the *Lady Chatterley* trial, the wild transgressions of books like Roth's Portnoy's Complaint and Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* persuaded me that to write fiction was to be obliged to take the reader by the hand to the edge – and jump. The business was to find a boundary, then cross it.

If they came to court today, those novels of Joyce and Lawrence would certainly be allowed into the public domain without much trouble. But I'm not so sure what would happen in the courtrooms of Twitter. For now we live uneasily with our sexual freedom. Revelations of horrific and widespread child abuse have shocked us into uncertainty.

Adults, especially men, have to be careful about speaking to children in the street. Feminists were right to tell us how oppressive public expressions of male desire could be. (If you doubt it, have another look at the excruciating, unfunny and embarrassing 1955 Marilyn Monroe movie *The Seven Year Itch*). But desire, in women as in men, is a reality, a subject. Can't we tell it from oppression? When Craig Raine published in May 2015 a wistful, clever poem about an ageing man's hopeless erotic thoughts, it stirred rage, hatred and fantasies of violence, of vengeful genital mutilation across the social media. When a Jilly Cooper novel was reissued recently, the original cover of thirty years ago was altered to suit modern tastes – a man's hand was politely raised from a woman's buttocks to her waist. Meanwhile, in books and especially on screens, sexual explicitness continues to flourish. Culturally, we are neither puritanical nor 'liberated'. Just profoundly confused.

The uses and abuses of freedom were the air we breathed in 1970. I feel neither nostalgic nor dismissive about those times now. There were gains and there were, plainly, excesses. When I showed my stories to Norwich friends, or to the two novelists who were keeping an avuncular eye on me, Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson, no one was shocked, no one thought my stories were outrageous or immoral. Bradbury would say something like, 'Not bad. When can I see the next one?'

By the mid-seventies the 'sixties' were winding down. The culture was waking up with a headache, and beginning to take stock. When it appeared in hardback, *First Love, Last Rites* was considered a critical, though certainly not a commercial, success. But even the positive reviews were scandalized. What monster had come among us? In fact, it was sometimes hard to tell the good reviews from the bad, for both listed with relish the obscenities and baroque perversions. It was difficult for me then, and would be even more difficult now, to persuade readers that my intentions

were actually moral. My amoral first-person narrators especially were supposed to be condemning themselves out of their own mouths. I thought it was more interesting for the author not to intervene.

Before writing down these thoughts I took a copy of *First Love, Last Rites* from my shelves in order to read the title story. This copy once belonged to my parents, and has my dedication, dated April 24 1975. (They were very proud, and a little horrified.) I don't think I'd read the story since I corrected the proofs in late 1974. Once I was over my irritation with commas serving as full stops (a trick I must have learned from Beckett), I found myself looking across the span of my adult life – from twenty-two to almost sixty-seven.

A pregnant rat scrabbling behind a skirting-board was an invention, but the beautiful, self-contained teenage girl, her boisterous and charming younger brother, their family at a point of disintegration, the small fishing town and a doomed eel-catching business were all briefly part of my life. As I read, I could smell tidal river mud from that high summer of 1971. The forty-five years that had passed since I wrote the story shrank to nothing. It's in the very nature of fiction that it lives suspended in a perpetual present tense. The past you think you've forgotten sits at your shoulder, waiting to remind you that life is indeed brief and you'd better make the best of what's left.

Ian McEwan, 2015

Solid Geometry

IN MELTON MOWBRAY in 1875 at an auction of articles of ‘curiosity and worth’, my great-grandfather, in the company of M his friend, bid for the penis of Captain Nicholls who died in Horsemonger jail in 1873. It was bottled in a glass twelve inches long, and, noted my great-grandfather in his diary that night, ‘in a beautiful state of preservation’. Also for auction was ‘the unnamed portion of the late Lady Barrymore. It went to Sam Israels for fifty guineas.’ My great-grandfather was keen on the idea of having the two items as a pair, and M dissuaded him. This illustrates perfectly their friendship. My great-grandfather the excitable theorist, M the man of action who knew when to bid at auctions. My great-grandfather lived for sixty-nine years. For forty-five of them, at the end of every day, he sat down before going to bed and wrote his thoughts in a diary. These diaries are on my table now, forty-five volumes bound in calf leather, and to the left sits Capt. Nicholls in the glass jar. My great-grandfather lived on the income derived from the patent of an invention of his father, a handy fastener used by corset-makers right up till the outbreak of the First World War. My great-grandfather liked gossip, numbers and theories. He also liked tobacco, good port, jugged hare and, very occasionally, opium. He liked to think of himself as a mathematician, though he never had a job, and never published a book. Nor did he ever travel or get his name in *The Times*, even when he died. In 1869 he married Alice, only daughter of the Rev. Toby Shadwell, co-author of a not highly regarded book on English wild flowers. I believe my great-grandfather to have been a very fine diarist, and when

I have finished editing the diaries and they are published I am certain he will receive the recognition due to him. When my work is over I will take a long holiday, travel somewhere cold and clean and treeless, Iceland or the Russian Steppes. I used to think that at the end of it all I would try, if it was possible, to divorce my wife Maisie, but now there is no need at all.

Often Maisie would shout in her sleep and I would have to wake her.

'Put your arm around me,' she would say. 'It was a horrible dream. I had it once before. I was in a plane flying over a desert. But it wasn't really a desert. I took the plane lower and I could see there were thousands of babies heaped up, stretching away into the horizon, all of them naked and climbing over each other. I was running out of fuel and I had to land the plane. I tried to find a space, I flew on and on looking for a space . . .'

'Go to sleep now,' I said through a yawn. 'It was only a dream.'

'No,' she cried. 'I mustn't go to sleep, not just yet.'

'Well, *I* have to sleep now,' I told her. 'I have to be up early in the morning.'

She shook my shoulder. 'Please don't go to sleep yet, don't leave me here.'

'I'm in the same bed,' I said. 'I won't leave you.'

'It makes no difference, don't leave me awake . . .' But my eyes were already closing.

Lately I have taken up my great-grandfather's habit. Before going to bed I sit down for half an hour and think over the day. I have no mathematical whimsies or sexual theories to note down. Mostly I write out what Maisie has said to me and what I have said to Maisie. Sometimes, for complete privacy, I lock myself in the bathroom, sit on the toilet seat and balance the writing-pad on my knees. Apart from me there is occasionally a spider or two in the bathroom. They climb up the waste pipe and crouch

perfectly still on the glaring white enamel. They must wonder where they have come to. After hours of crouching they turn back, puzzled, or perhaps disappointed they could not learn more. As far as I can tell, my great-grandfather made only one reference to spiders. On May 8th, 1906, he wrote, ‘Bismarck is a spider.’

In the afternoons Maisie used to bring me tea and tell me her nightmares. Usually I was going through old newspapers, compiling indexes, cataloguing items, putting down this volume, picking up another. Maisie said she was in a bad way. Recently she had been sitting around the house all day glancing at books on psychology and the occult, and almost every night she had bad dreams. Since the time we exchanged physical blows, lying in wait to hit each other with the same shoe outside the bathroom, I had had little sympathy for her. Part of her problem was jealousy. She was very jealous . . . of my great-grandfather’s forty-five-volume diary, and of my purpose and energy in editing it. She was doing nothing. I was putting down one volume and picking up another when Maisie came in with the tea.

‘Can I tell you my dream?’ she asked. ‘I was flying this plane over a kind of desert . . .’

‘Tell me later, Maisie,’ I said. ‘I’m in the middle of something here.’ After she had gone I stared at the wall in front of my desk and thought about M, who came to talk and dine with my great-grandfather regularly over a period of fifteen years up until his sudden and unexplained departure one evening in 1898. M, whoever he might have been, was something of an academic, as well as a man of action. For example, on the evening of August 9th, 1870, the two of them are talking about positions for lovemaking and M tells my great-grandfather that copulation *a posteriori* is the most natural way owing to the position of the clitoris and because other anthropoids favour this method. My great-grandfather, who copulated about half-a-dozen times in his entire life, and that with Alice during the first year of their

marriage, wondered out loud what the Church's view was and straight away M is able to tell him that the seventh-century theologian Theodore considered copulation *a posteriori* a sin ranking with masturbation and therefore worthy of forty penances. Later in the same evening my great-grandfather produced mathematical evidence that the maximum number of positions cannot exceed the prime number seventeen. M scoffed at this and told him he had seen a collection of drawings by Romano, a pupil of Raphael's, in which twenty-four positions were shown. And, he said, he had heard of a Mr F. K. Forberg who had accounted for ninety. By the time I remembered the tea Maisie had left by my elbow it was cold.

An important stage in the deterioration of our marriage was reached as follows. I was sitting in the bathroom one evening writing out a conversation Maisie and I had had about the Tarot pack when suddenly she was outside, rapping on the door and rattling the door-handle.

'Open the door,' she called out. 'I want to come in.'

I said to her, 'You'll have to wait a few minutes more. I've almost finished.'

'Let me in now,' she shouted. 'You're not using the toilet.'

'Wait,' I replied, and wrote another line or two. Now Maisie was kicking the door.

'My period has started and I need to get something.' I ignored her yells and finished my piece, which I considered to be particularly important. If I left it till later certain details would be lost. There was no sound from Maisie now and I assumed she was in the bedroom. But when I opened the door she was standing right in my way with a shoe in her hand. She brought the heel of it sharply down on my head, and I only had time to move slightly to one side. The heel caught the top of my ear and cut it badly.

'There,' said Maisie, stepping round me to get to the bathroom, 'now we are both bleeding,' and she banged the door shut. I picked up the shoe and stood quietly and