

*This one's a sleeper . . . I know nothing about Ian McEwan except by inference: that he is British and that his command of this story exhibits a masterful touch as he deals with elements which in the hands of lesser writers would have led to disaster: a fractured marriage, a collection of diaries almost a century old, and a new concept of-*

# **SOLID GEOMETRY**

**IAN McEWAN**

**ILLUSTRATED by RICHARD OLSEN**

**I**N 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 Horse-monger 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 '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.

**O**FTEN 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."

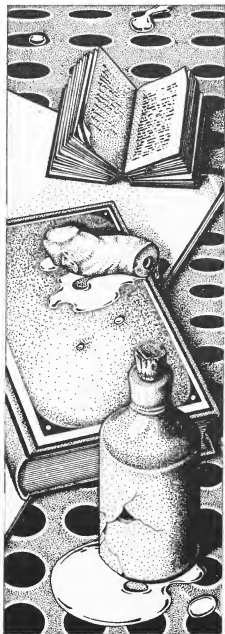
"No," she cried. "I mustn't go to sleep, not just yet."

"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 have had

little sympathy for her. Part of her problem is jealousy. She is 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.

**A**N 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 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 patiently outside the bathroom holding a handkerchief to my bleeding ear. Maisie was in the bathroom about ten minutes and as she came out I caught her neatly and squarely on the top of her head. I did not give her time to move. She stood perfectly still for a moment looking straight into my eyes.

"You worm," she breathed, and went down to the kitchen to nurse her head out of my sight.

**D**URING SUPPER yesterday Maisie claimed that a man locked in a cell with only the Tarot cards would have access to all knowledge. She had been doing a reading that afternoon and the cards were still spread about the floor.

"Could he work out the street plan of Calparaiso from the cards?" I asked.

"You're being stupid," she replied.

"Could it tell him the best way

to start a laundry business, the best way to make an omlette or a kidney machine?"

"Your mind is so narrow," she complained. "You're so narrow, so predictable."

"Could he," I insisted, "tell me who M. is or why. . . ."

"Those things don't matter," she cried. "They're not necessary."

"They are still knowledge. Could he find them out?"

She hesitated. "Yes, he could."

I smiled and said nothing.

"What's so funny?" she said. I shrugged, and she began to get angry. She wanted to be disapproved. "Why did you ask all those pointless questions?"

I shrugged again. "I just wanted to know if you really meant *everything*."

Maisie banged the table and screamed. "Damn you! Why are you always trying me out? Why don't you say something real?" And with that we both recognized we had reached the point where all our discussions led and we subsided into bitter silence.

**WORK ON THE DIARIES** cannot proceed until I have cleared up the mystery surrounding M. After coming to dinner on and off for fifteen years and supplying my great grandfather with a mass of material for his theories, M. simply disappears from the pages of the diary. On Tuesday December 6th my great grandfather invited M. to dine on the following

Saturday, and although M. came my great grandfather in the entry for that day simply writes, 'M. to dinner.' On any other day the conversation at these meals is recorded at great length. M. had been to dinner on Monday 5th of December and the conversation had been about geometry, and the entries for the rest of that week are entirely given over to the same subject. There is absolutely no hint of antagonism. Besides, my great grandfather needed M. M. provided his material, M. knew what was going on, he was familiar with London and he had been on the Continent a number of times. He knew all about socialism and Darwin, he had an acquaintance in the free love movement, a friend of James Hinton. M. was *in* the world in a way which my great grandfather, who left Melton Mowbray only once in his life time to visit Nottingham, was not. Even as a young man my great grandfather preferred to theorise by the fireside; all he needed were the materials M. supplied. For example, one evening in June 1884 M., who was just back from London, gave my great grandfather an account of how the streets of the town were fouled and clogged by horse dung. Now in that same week my great grandfather had been reading the essay by Malthus called 'On the Principle of Population.' That night he made an excited entry in the diary about a pamphlet he

wanted to write and have published. It was to be called 'De Stercorae Equorum.' The pamphlet was never published and probably never written, but there are detailed notes in the diary entries for the two weeks following that evening. In 'De Stercorae Equorum' (Concerning Horseshit) he assumes a geometric growth in the horse population and working from detailed street plans he predicted that the metropolis would be impassible by 1935. By impassible he took to mean an average thickness of one foot (compressed) in every major street. He described involved experiments outside his own stables to determine the compressibility of horse dung which he managed to express mathematically. It was all pure theory, of course. His results rested on the assumption that no dung would be shovelled aside in the fifty years to come. Very likely it was M. who talked my great grandfather out of the project.

ONE MORNING, after a long dark night of Maisie's nightmares, we were lying side by side in bed and I said,

"What is it you really want? Why don't you go back to your job? These long walks, all this analysis, sitting around the house, lying in bed all morning, the Tarot pack, the nightmares . . . what is it you want?"

And she said, "I want to get my head straight," which she had said

many times before.

I said, "Your head, your mind, it's not like a hotel kitchen, you know, you can't throw stuff out like old tin cans. It's more like a river than a place, moving and changing all the time. You can't make rivers flow straight."

"Don't go through all that again she said. "I'm not trying to make rivers flow straight, I'm trying to get my head straight."

"You've got to *do* something," I told her. "You can't do nothing. Why not go back to your job? You didn't have nightmares when you were working. You were never so unhappy when you were working."

"I've got to stand back from all that," she said. "I'm not sure what any of it means."

"Fashion," I said, "it's all fashion. Fashionable metaphors, fashionable reading, fashionable malaise. What do you care about Jung, for example? You've read twelve pages in a month."

"Don't go on," she pleaded, "You know it leads nowhere."

But I went on.

"You've never been anywhere," I told her, "you've never done anything. You're a nice girl without even the blessing of an unhappy childhood. Your sentimental Buddhism, this junk shop mysticism, joss stick therapy, magazine astrology. . . . none of it is yours, you've worked none of it out for yourself. You fell into it, you fell into a swamp of respectable intuitions. You haven't the

originality or passion to intuit anything yourself beyond your own unhappiness. Why are you filling your mind with other people's mystic banalities and giving yourself nightmares?" I got out of bed, opened the curtains and began to get dressed.

"You talk like this was a fiction seminar," Maisie said. "Why are you trying to make things worse for me?" Self pity began to well up from inside her, but she fought it down. "When you are talking," she went on, "I can feel myself, you know, being screwed up like a piece of paper."

"Perhaps we are in a fiction seminar," I said grimly. Maisie sat up in bed staring at her lap. Suddenly her tone changed. She patted the pillow beside her and said softly,

"Come over here. Come and sit here. I want to touch you, I want you to touch me . . ." But I was sighing, and already on my way to the kitchen.

In the kitchen I made myself some coffee and took it through to my study. It had occurred to me in my night of broken sleep that a possible clue to the disappearance of M. might be found in pages of geometry. I had always skipped through them before because mathematics does not interest me. On the Monday, December 5th, 1898, M. and my great grandfather discussed the *vescis piscis*, which apparently is the subject of Euclid's first proposition and a profound influence on the

groundplans of many ancient religious buildings. I read through the account of the conversation carefully, trying to understand as best I could the geometry of it. Then, turning the page, I found a lengthy anecdote which M. told my great grandfather that same evening when the coffee had been brought in, and the cigars were lit. Just as I was beginning to read Maisie came in.

"And what about you," she said, as if there had not been an hour break in our exchange. "All you have is books. Crawling over the past like a fly on a turd." I was angry, of course, but I smiled and said cheerfully.

"Crawling? Well at least I'm moving."

"You don't speak to me anymore," she said, "You play me like a pin ball machine, for points."

"Good morning Hamlet," I replied, and sat in my chair waiting patiently for what she had to say next. But she did not speak; she left, closing the study door softly behind her.

**I**N SEPTEMBER 1870," M. began to tell my great grandfather, "I came into the possession of certain documents which not only invalidate everything fundamental to our science of solid geometry but also undermine the whole canon of our physical laws and force one to redefine one's place in Nature's scheme. These papers outweigh in importance the com-

bined work of Marx and Darwin. They were entrusted to me by a young American mathematician, and they are the work of David Hunter, a mathematician too and a Scotsman. The American's name was Goodman. I had corresponded with his father over a number of years in connection with his work on the cyclical theory of menstration which, incredibly enough, is still widely discredited in this country. I met the young Goodman in Vienna where, along with Hunter and mathematicians from a dozen countries, he had been attending an international conference on mathematics. Goodman was pale and greatly disturbed when I met him, and planned to return to America the following day even though the conference was not yet half complete. He gave the papers into my care with instructions that I was to deliver them to David Hunter if I was ever to learn of his whereabouts. And then, only after much persuasion and insistence on my part, he told me what he had witnessed on the third day of the conference. The conference met every morning at nine thirty when a paper was read and a general discussion ensued. At eleven o'clock refreshments were brought in and many of the mathematicians would get up from the long, highly polished table round which they were all gathered and stroll about the large, elegant room and engage in informal discussions with their

colleagues. Now, the conference lasted two weeks, and by a long-standing arrangement the most eminent of the mathematicians read their papers first, followed by the slightly less eminent, and so on in a descending hierarchy throughout the two weeks, which caused, as it is wont to do among highly intelligent men, occasional but intense jealousies. Hunter, though a brilliant mathematician, was young and virtually unknown outside his university which was Edinburgh. He had applied to deliver what he described as a very important paper on solid geometry, and since he was of little account in this pantheon he was assigned to read to the conference on the last day but one, by which time many of the most important figures would have returned to their respective countries. And so on the third morning, as the servants were bringing in the refreshments, Hunter stood up suddenly and addressed his colleagues just as they were rising from their seats. He was a large, shaggy man and, though young, he had about him a certain presence which reduced the hum of conversation to a complete silence.

"Gentlemen," said Hunter, "I must ask you to forgive this improper form of address, but I have something to tell you of the utmost importance. I have discovered the plane without a surface." Amid derisive smiles and gentle, bemused laughter, Hunter



picked up from the table a large white sheet of paper. With a pocket knife he made an incision along its surface about three inches long and slightly to one side of its centre. Then he made some rapid, complicated folds and, holding the paper aloft so all could see, he appeared to draw one corner of it through the incision and as he did so it disappeared.

"Behold, gentleman," said Hunter, holding out his empty hands towards the company, 'the plane without a surface.'"

**M**AISIE CAME INTO my room, washed now and smelling faintly of perfumed soap. She came and stood behind my chair and placed her hands on my shoulders.

"What are you reading?" she said.

"Just bits of the diary which I haven't looked at before." She began to massage me gently at the base of my neck. I would have found it soothing if it had still been the first year of our marriage. But it was the sixth year and it generated a kind of tension which communicated itself the length of my spine. Maisie wanted something. To restrain her I placed my right hand on her left and, mistaking this for affection, she leaned forward and kissed under my ear. Her breath smelled of toothpaste and toast. She tugged at my shoulder.

"Let's go in the bedroom," she whispered. "We haven't made

love for nearly two weeks now."

"I know," I replied. "You know how it is . . . with my work." I felt no desire for Maisie or any other woman. All I wanted to do was turn the next page of my great grandfather's diary. Maisie took her hands off my shoulder and stood by my side. There was such a sudden ferocity in her silence that I found myself tensing like a sprinter on the starting line. She stretched forward and picked up the sealed jar containing Capt. Nicholls. As she lifted it his penis drifted dreamily from one end of the glass to the other.

"You're so *complacent*," Maisie shrieked just before she hurled the glass bottle at the wall in front of my table. Instinctively I covered my face with my hands to shield off the shattering glass. As I opened my eyes I heard myself saying,

"Why did you do that? That belonged to my great grandfather." Amid the broken glass and the rising stench of formaldehyde lay Capt. Nicholls, slouched across the leather covers of a volume of the diary, grey, limp, and menacing, transformed from a treasured curiosity into a horrible obscenity.

"That was a terrible thing to do. Why did you do that?" I said again.

"I'm going for a walk," Maisie replied and slammed the door this time as she left the room.

**I** DID NOT MOVE from my chair

for a long time. Maisie had destroyed an object of great value to me. It had stood in his study while he lived, and then it stood in mine, linking my life with his. I picked a few splinters of glass from my lap and stared at the hundred and sixty year old piece of another human on my table. I looked at it and thought of all the homunculae which had swarmed down its length. I thought of all the places it had been, Cape Town, Boston, Jerusalem, traveling in the dark, fetid inside of Capt. Nicholls' leather breeches, emerging occasionally into the dazzling sunlight to discharge urine in some jostling public place. I thought also of all the things it had touched, all the molecules, of Capt. Nicholls' exploring hands on lonely unrequited nights at sea, the sweating walls of cunts of young girls and old whores. Their molecules must still exist today, a fine dust blowing from Cheapside to Leicestershire. Who knows how long it might have lasted in its glass jar. I began to clear up the mess. I brought the rubbish bucket in from the kitchen. I swept and picked up all the glass I could find and swabbed up the formaldehyde. Then, holding him by just one end, I tried to ease Capt. Nicholls onto a sheet of newspaper. My stomach heaved as the foreskin began to come away in my fingers. Finally, with my eyes closed I succeeded, and wrapping him carefully in the newspaper, I

carried him into the garden and buried him under the geraniums. All this time I tried to prevent my resentment towards Maisie filling my mind. I wanted to continue with M.'s story. Back in my chair I dabbed at a few spots of formaldehyde which had blotted the ink, and read on.

**“FOR AS LONG** as a minute the room was frozen, and with each successive second it appeared to freeze harder. The first to speak was Dr. Stanley Rose of Cambridge University who had much to lose by Hunter's plane without a surface. His reputation, which was very considerable, indeed, rested upon his 'Principles of Solid Geometry'.

“How dare you, sir. How dare you insult the dignity of this assembly with a worthless conjuror's trick.” And bolstered by the rising murmur of concurrence behind him he added, “You should be ashamed, young man, thoroughly ashamed.” With that the room erupted like a volcano. With the exception of young Goodman, and of the servants who still stood by with the refreshments, the whole room turned on Hunter and directed at him an insensible babble of denunciation, invective and threat. Some thumped their fists on the table in their fury, others waived their clenched fists. One very frail German gentlemen fell to the floor in an apoplexy and had to be helped to a chair. And there stood Hunter, firm and

outwardly unmoved, his head inclined slightly to one side, his fingers resting lightly on the surface of the long polished table. That such an uproar should follow a worthless conjuror's trick clearly demonstrated the extent of the underlying unease, and Hunter surely appreciated this. Raising his hand and the company falling suddenly silent once more he said,

"Gentlemen, your concern is understandable and I will effect another proof, the ultimate proof." This said he sat down and removed his shoes, stood up and removed his jacket and then called for a volunteer to assist him at which Goodman came forward. Hunter strode through the crowd to a couch which stood along one of the walls and while he settled himself upon it he told the mystified Goodman that when he returned to England he should take with him Hunter's papers and keep them there until he came to collect them. When the mathematicians had gathered round the couch Hunter rolled onto his stomach and clasped his hands behind his back in a strange posture to fashion a hoop with his arms. He asked Goodman to hold his arms in that position for him, and rolled on his side where he began a number of strenuous jerking movements, which enabled him to pass one of his feet through the hoop. He asked his assistant to turn him on his other side where he per-

formed the same movements again and succeeded in passing his other foot between his arms, and at the same time bent his trunk in such a way that his head was able to pass through the hoop in the opposite direction to his feet. With the help of his assistant he began to pass his legs and head past each other through the hoop made by his arms. It was then that the distinguished assembly vented, as one man, a single yelp of utter incredulity. Hunter was beginning to disappear, and now, as his legs and head passed through his arms with greater facility, seemed even to be drawn through by some invisible power, he was almost gone. And now. . . he was gone, quite gone, and nothing remained."

**M.**'s STORY put my great grandfather in a frenzy of excitement. In his diary that night he recorded how he tried "to prevail upon my guest to send for the papers upon the instant" even though it was by now two o'clock in the morning. M., however, was more sceptical about the whole thing. "Americans," he told my great grandfather, "often indulge in fantastic tales." But he agreed to bring along the papers the following day. As it turned out M. did not dine with my great grandfather that night because of another engagement, but he called round in the late afternoon with the papers. Before he left he told my great grandfather he had

been through them a number of times and "there was no sense to be had out of them." He did not realize then how much he was underestimating my great grandfather as an amateur mathematician. Over a glass of sherry in front of the drawing room fire the two men arranged to dine together again at the end of the week, on Saturday. For the next three days my great grandfather hardly paused from his reading of Hunter's theorems to eat or sleep. The diary is full of nothing else. The pages are covered with scribbles, diagrams and symbols. It seems that Hunter had to devise a new set of symbols, virtually a whole new language, to express his ideas. By the end of the second day my great grandfather had made his first breakthrough. At the bottom of a page of mathematical scribble he wrote, "dimensionality is a function of consciousness." Turning to the entry for the next day I read the words, "It disappeared in my hands." He had re-established the plane without a surface. And there, spread out in front of me were step by step instructions on how to fold the piece of paper. Turning the next page I suddenly understood the mystery of M.'s disappearance. Undoubtedly encouraged by my great grandfather he had taken part that evening in a scientific experiment, probably in a spirit of great scepticism. For here my great grandfather had drawn a series of small sketches il-

lustrating what at first glance looked like yoga positions. Clearly they were the secret of Hunter's disappearing act.

**M**Y HANDS WERE trembling as I cleared a space on my desk. I selected a clean sheet of typing paper and laid it in front of me. I fetched a razor blade from the bathroom. I rumaged in a drawer and found an old compass, sharpened a pencil and fitted it in. I searched through the house till I found an accurate steel ruler I had once used for fitting window panes, and then I was ready. First I had to cut the paper to size. The piece that Hunter had so casually picked up from the table had obviously been carefully prepared beforehand. The length of the sides had to express a specific ratio. Using the compass I found the centre of the paper and through this point I drew a line parallel to one of the sides and continued it right to the edge. Then I had to construct a rectangle whose measurements bore a particular relation to those of the sides of the paper. The centre of this rectangle occurred on the line in such a way as to dissect it by the Golden Mean. From the top of this rectangle I drew intersecting arcs, again of specified proportionate radii. This operation was repeated at the lower end of the rectangle, and when the two points of intersection were joined I had the line of incision. Then I started work on the folding lines.

Each line seemed to express, in its length, angle of incline and point of intersection with other lines, some mysterious inner harmony of numbers. As I intersected arcs, drew lines and made folds I felt I was blindly operating a system of the highest, most terrifying form of knowledge, the mathematics of the Absolute. By the time I had made the final fold the piece of paper was the shape of a geometric flower with three concentric rings arranged round the incision at the centre. There was something so tranquil and perfect about this design, something so remote and compelling that as I stared into it I felt myself going into a light trance and my mind becoming clear and inactive. I shook my head and glanced away. It was time now to turn the flower in on itself and pull it through the incision. This was a delicate operation and now my hands were trembling again. Only by staring into the centre of the design could I calm myself. With my thumbs I began to push the sides of the paper flower towards the centre, and as I did so I felt a numbness settle over the back of my skull. I pushed a little further, the paper glowed whiter for an instant and then it *seemed* to disappear. I say *seemed* because at first I could not be sure whether I could feel it still in my hands and not see it, or see it but not feel it, or whether I could sense it had disappeared while its external properties remained. The numb-

ness had spread right across my head and shoulders. My senses seemed inadequate to grasp what was happening. "Dimensionality is a function of consciousness" I thought. I brought my hands together and there was nothing between them, but even when I opened them again and saw nothing I could not be sure the paper flower had completely gone. An impression remained, an after image not on the retina but in the mind itself. Just then the door opened behind me and Maisie said,

"What are you doing?"

I RETURNED as if from a dream to the room and to the faint smell of formaldehyde. It was a long, long time ago now, the destruction of Capt. Nicholls, but the smell revived my resentment which spread through me like the numbness. Maisie slouched in the doorway muffled in a thick coat and woollen scarf. She seemed a long way off, and as I looked at her my resentment merged into a familiar weariness of our marriage. I thought, Why did she break the glass? Because she wanted to make love? Because she wanted a penis? Because she was jealous of my work, and wanted to smash the connection I had with my great grandfather's life?

"Why did you do it?" I said out loud, involuntarily. Maisie snorted. She had opened the door and found me hunched over my

table staring at my hands.

"Have you been sitting there all afternoon," she asked, "thinking about *that*?" She giggled. "What happened to it anyway? Did you suck it off?"

"I buried it," I said, "under the geraniums." She came into the room a little way and said in a serious tone,

"I'm sorry about that, I really am. I just did it before I knew what was happening. Do you forgive me?"

I hesitated and then, because my weariness had blossomed into a sudden resolution, I said,

"Yes, of course I forgive you. It was only a prick in a pickle," and we both laughed. Maisie came over to me and kissed me, and I returned the kiss, prising her lips with my tongue.

"Are you hungry?" she said when we were done with kissing. "Shall I make some supper?"

"Yes," I said. "I would love that." Maisie kissed me on the top of my head and left the room while I turned back to my studies, resolving to be as kind as I possibly could to Maisie that evening.

**L**ATER WE SAT in the kitchen eating the meal Maisie had cooked and getting mildly drunk on a bottle of wine. We smoked a joint, the first one we had had together in a very long time. Maisie told me how she was going to get a job with the Forestry Commission planting trees in Scotland

next summer. And I told Maisie about the conversation M. and my great grandfather had had about *a posteriori*, and about my great grandfather's theory that there could not be more than the prime number seventeen positions for making love. We both laughed and Maisie squeezed my hand, and love-making hung in the air between us, in the warm fug of the kitchen. Then we put our coats on and went for a walk. It was almost a full moon. We walked along the main road which runs outside our house and then turned down a narrow street of tightly packed houses with immaculate and minute front gardens. We did not talk much, but our arms were linked and Maisie told me how very stoned and happy she was. We came to a small park which was locked and we stood outside the gates looking up at the moon through the leafless branches. When we came home Maisie took a leisurely hot bath while I browsed in my study, checking on a few details. Our bedroom is a warm, comfortable room, luxurious in its way. The bed is seven foot by eight and I made it myself in the first year of our marriage. Maisie made the sheets, dyed them a deep, rich blue and embroidered the pillow cases. The only light in the room shone through a rough old goatskin lampshade Maisie bought from a man who came to the door. It was a long time since I had taken an interest in the bed-

room. We lay side by side in the tangle of sheets and rugs, Maisie voluptuous and drowsy after her bath and stretched full out, and I propped up on my elbow. Maisie said sleepily,

"I was walking along the river this afternoon. The trees are beautiful now, the oaks, the elms . . . there are two copper beeches about a mile past the footbridge. You should see them now. . . . ahh that feels good." I had eased her onto her belly and was caressing her back as she spoke. "There are blackberries, the biggest ones I've ever seen, growing all along the path, and elderberries too. I'm going to make some wine this autumn . . ." I leaned over her and kissed the nape of her neck and brought her arms behind her back. She liked to be manipulated in this way and she submitted warmly. "And the river is really still," she was saying. "You know, reflecting the trees, and the leaves are dropping into the river. Before the winter comes we should go there together, by the river, in the leaves. I found this little place. No one goes there . . ." Holding Maisie's arms in position with one hand I worked her legs towards the 'hoop' with the other. ". . . I sat in this place for half an hour without moving, like a tree. I saw a water rat running along the opposite bank and different kinds of

ducks landing on the river and taking off. I heard these plopping noises in the river but I didn't know what they were, and I saw two orange butterflies, they almost came on my hand." When I had her legs in place Maisie said, "Position number eighteen," and we both laughed softly. "Let's go there tomorrow, to the river," said Maisie as I carefully eased her head towards her arms. "Careful, careful—that hurts!" she suddenly shouted and tried to struggle. But it was too late now. Her head and legs were in place in the hoop of her arms and I was beginning to push them through, past each other. "What's happening?" cried Maisie. Now the positioning of her limbs expressed breathtaking beauty, the nobility of the human form and, as in the paper flower, there was a fascinating power in its symmetry. I felt the trance coming on again and the numbness settling over the back of my head. As I drew her arms and legs through Maisie appeared to turn in on herself like a sock. "Oh God," she sighed, "What's happening?" and her voice sounded very far away. Then she was gone . . . and not gone. Her voice was quite tiny, "What's happening?" and all that remained was the echo of her question above the deep blue sheets.

—IAN MCEWAN

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