
Opening Extract from...

The Forgotten Affairs of Youth

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This book is for Diane Martin, editor and friend.

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 Isabel Dalhousie, a philosopher, lowered her copy of the *Scotsman* newspaper and smiled. On the other side of the breakfast table, buttering a slice of bread for their young son, Charlie, who was now two and a half, and hungry, was her lover and fiancé, Jamie. She loved them both so much, so much. They were her world – a tousle-headed little boy and a bassoonist; more important to her than anything else – more than the complete works of Kant and Aristotle, more than the city she lived in, more than Scotland itself.

'Something amusing?' Jamie asked.

There was normally little to laugh at in the papers. Political scandals, economic disaster, suffering in all its familiar forms – these were the daily staple of a disaster-prone, uneasy planet. Add to that the seeming inability of the Scottish rugby team to defend itself against the predations of a group of hefty New Zealanders on a summer tour, and the newspaper's offering for that day was bleak.

Isabel had read out to Jamie the opening paragraph of the rugby report, in which the Scottish side's performance had

been described in less than glowing terms. Jamie, however, had listened with only half an ear; he liked tennis and golf, and found that games involving a ball any larger than those used in these two games held little attraction for him. For her part, although she did not follow sport at all closely, Isabel enjoyed reading about rugby, a game that struck her as being one of the few remaining tribal rituals on offer to males in modern societies. An anthropologist might have a field-day in pursuing this interpretation; might note with some interest the famous rugby haka of the New Zealanders, as their players lined up and challenged the other team with thumbed noses and intimidating grunts; might listen to the Scottish supporters singing 'Flower of Scotland', with its fourteenth-century military references (*fourteenth* century!); might remark upon the wailing bagpipes at the beginning of the game and the painted faces and . . .

And there was another, more personal reason for her interest: as a schoolgirl she had been in love, at a safe distance, with a boy who had seemed impossibly handsome, even when covered in mud and in a heaving scrummage. Some men were like that, she mused: they were much improved by mud.

But it was not the rugby news that made her laugh; it was a small item in the paper's political diary.

'Very amusing,' she said to Jamie. 'There's a story here about a Glasgow politician who held a surgery. You know those consultation sessions they hold – they call them surgeries; constituents can drop in and tackle them about local problems.'

Jamie nodded. 'I went to see my local Member of Parliament once. He was actually very helpful.'

'Yes. That's what an MP's surgery is for. But this one apparently had a constituent coming in to complain about a sore nose. Can you believe it? A sore nose.'

Jamie smiled. 'Well, I suppose if you call it a surgery . . .'

'Yes,' said Isabel. 'But surely people understand that it's a politician they're seeing – not a doctor.' She paused. 'Or are there people who really think that their Member of Parliament should be able to do something about their aches and pains?'

She thought there were; once the state in its benignity embraced us, then the routes by which it dispensed its succour could easily be confused.

She picked up the newspaper. 'People are pretty strange, aren't they? They can be so . . . well, I suppose there's no other word for it but *misinformed*.'

'Yes,' said Jamie. 'They can. I was reading somewhere or other about a woman who wrote to an advice column asking whether a baby adopted from Korea would speak Korean when he grew up, even if raised elsewhere.'

'She's not alone,' said Isabel. 'Natural language. Scottish kings have believed in that – James IV, I think, even conducted an experiment. He had a couple of children taken off to Inchkeith Island and looked after by a nurse who was dumb. He wanted to find out what language children would speak naturally if they weren't exposed to English – or, rather, to Scots. He thought it would be Hebrew.'

'And it turned out to be Korean?'

Isabel smiled. 'It was nothing, I imagine. Just sounds. Or, as Walter Scott suggested, they might have sounded like birds. There are lots of birds on Inchkeith Island.'

Jamie wondered whether the children might have invented a language.

'Not from scratch,' said Isabel. 'Or only a rudimentary one.'

Jamie passed a piece of buttered bread to Charlie, who seized it, examining it intently before putting it into his mouth.

'Rudimentary? So they'd have no grammar – just nouns for

the various objects? Not that they'd need many. The sea. Birds' eggs. Food. Fish.'

'Yes,' said Isabel. 'And a word for Scotland too, perhaps. They'd look across the firth and see the mainland, and they might give it a name.'

He shook his head. 'I find that story rather sad,' he said.

Isabel put the newspaper down on the table. She thought about the children on the island, imagining them huddled together in the winter, with no words to describe their misery. A familiar question occurred to her: if you had no language, then what form did your thoughts take – if you thought at all? Of course you thought – she had never had any difficulty with accepting that – but how limited would your thoughts be in the absence of any words to express them?

She looked at Charlie and smiled. He returned the smile. He had no words for what had just passed between them, she told herself; they had engaged with one another, and affection and amusement, tinged with a note of conspiracy, had been in the mind of each. These were feelings, though; not articulated intentions or thoughts as such. Or had Charlie thought, *She's smiling at me*, even if he as yet had no word for smile? It was, she decided, rather like looking at an unfamiliar stretch of landscape; one might not know its name but one could still be said to know *it*, and knowledge of the geographical name would make no difference to how one thought about what one saw. And people still felt hungry, even if they had no name for hunger.

Jamie reached for the newspaper, found the diary item and read it. Then he looked up. 'But he's a doctor,' he said.

'Who?'

He pointed to the column in the newspaper. 'Him. The Member of Parliament who was asked about the sore nose. He's

a doctor. I've seen him on television. He's the health spokesman for his party.'

'Oh.'

'So that constituent who asked about his nose wasn't so stupid after all.'

Isabel made an apologetic gesture. 'I suppose I jumped to a conclusion,' she said. 'But so did the newspaper. *Mea culpa*, or rather, *nostra culpa*.'

Jamie looked at her with mock disapproval. 'Maybe we shouldn't judge others too quickly.' He tried to make it sound as if he was joking, but the comment came across as censorious.

'All right,' she said. 'It's very easy to get things wrong when we aren't in possession of all the facts.'

'And I suspect that we hardly ever know everything we should,' said Jamie.

He might as well admit to a serious point: he wanted her to think about it; he wanted Isabel to be less *certain*; he wanted her to know that there were times when she might not be right.

But she was not thinking chastening thoughts: Isabel was a philosopher and she could not help but follow a challenging train of thought once it had been mooted. Jamie had suggested that we had to make do with imperfect knowledge, and he was right, she thought. Yet not knowing everything might be preferable to having all the facts set out before one. For example, did any of us really want to know the exact day, the hour even, when we were to die? She considered not. Nor did we necessarily want to know what would happen after we were gone.

That, of course, raised a whole range of issues about confidence and belief. Civilisations arose because people believed in them and in the values they represented. People built cathedrals and palaces, painted masterpieces – or paid other people to paint

them – because they felt that what they were doing would last. If they thought that everything was just for next year, then they would hardly bother. It would be rather like living in a campsite, or like being a passing tenant of a patch of earth. So when a lover said, 'I want to be with you always,' he had to mean it, even if he knew that it could not be true.

Charlie had finished with the piece of bread Jamie had fed him and was now waving his arms in the air – his signal for more.

'I adore the way he does that,' said Isabel. 'Imagine if one could go through life waving one's arms in the air whenever one wanted something.'

'Some do,' said Jamie. 'Conductors, in particular. They wave their arms at you if they want you to play with more expression.'

He remembered something that made him smile. 'And sometimes they forget that they're not in the concert hall. I saw Giorgio – remember the conductor I introduced you to last year? Well, I once saw him buying pistachio nuts at a delicatessen in Glasgow. The assistant was measuring them out and he urged her to put in more by waving his arms in just the same way as he gets us to play *fortissimo*. I imagine he had no idea he was doing it.'

Isabel took over the feeding of Charlie, glancing at her watch as she did so.

'Time,' she said.

It could have been a comment on the matters she had been pondering – on permanence and our sense of the future – but it was more prosaic than that.

'Yes,' sighed Jamie. 'I know. I must go.'

He had a rehearsal that morning in Glasgow and would have to catch the train from Haymarket Station in an hour or so. The journey was so familiar, a meandering ride across the waist-belt

of Scotland, the hills of Stirlingshire off to the right, gentle, soft; past small towns in which nothing happened; past the grey barracks of Glasgow's outskirts, and culminating in the echoing halls of Queen Street Station: a trip that lasted not much more than forty-five minutes, but which took one out of one culture and into another; from a clear Eastern light to a diffuse Western glow; from cold to warmth, some might say.

He now rose from the table, planted a kiss on Charlie's forehead and went off to get ready.

Isabel prepared another piece of buttered bread for Charlie, this time spreading it with a thin layer of Marmite. Charlie was an unusual child, at least in his taste for savoury foods. His first word had been 'olive', and this had presaged a taste for anchovy paste and horseradish sauce, even for mild curries. His contemporaries from the playgroup he now attended each morning would not have understood; they had eyes only for brightly iced cupcakes and they would have spat out the pickled gherkins to be found neatly packed in Charlie's plastic lunch box. Isabel called the lunch box a tiffin box, a word she had picked up from her paternal grandfather, who had been in India. She had been five when he died, and her memory of him was hazy. In fact, all that she remembered was his moustache, which was an elaborate salt-and-pepper affair, and the ancient brass-bound tiffin box that sat on a table in his hall.

'Tiffin,' Charlie suddenly announced. 'Charlie want tiffin now.'

Isabel gave him the piece of bread, which he examined briefly before throwing on the floor.

'Tiffin,' he said.

Isabel picked up the bread. 'Don't throw food, Charlie. That's not nice.'

Moral philosophy for two-year-olds, she thought. *Don't throw*

food. It was as good a starting point as any to begin the teaching of responsibility towards the world around us. And it was helpful to back it up with some justification too: *that's not nice*. Again, a simple expression said it all. Philosophers might tie themselves in knots over the question of conduct that was morally wrong – that debate, after all, was what Isabel's job was about – but perhaps the ultimate answer was so much simpler: *that's not nice*. Did one have to go further than that? She sighed. Of course one did; morality was not about what you liked or disliked; it had to be justified, to have some reasoning behind it.

'Tiffin is for later,' she said. 'You can have tiffin at playgroup.'

'Tiffin now,' said Charlie.

'No,' she said. 'Tiffin comes later – at tiffin-time, darling. Eleven-thirty.'

She reflected on this short exchange. Charlie had given voice to a desire: he wanted tiffin now. She had refused him – tiffin came with conditions: it could be enjoyed only at a certain time. Charlie might well think: why? If one can eat tiffin at eleven-thirty, one can surely eat it now. It was an arbitrary rule perhaps, but it offered a more general lesson besides: that we cannot always have what we want. The age of two and a half, Isabel thought, was as good a time as any to learn this most difficult and disappointing of lessons about life.

But there could at least be an explanation, although she doubted whether an explanation was what a child would want.

'Tiffin is for later, you see, darling. Tiffin is for when you're hungry. See?'

'Hungry now,' said Charlie.

With Charlie dropped off at his playgroup, and his tiffin box entrusted to the supervisor for safe keeping, Isabel walked along

Merchiston Crescent to Bruntsfield. Conscience dictated that she should have returned to her desk and tackled the pile of unedited manuscripts awaiting inclusion in the next issue of the *Review of Applied Ethics*, but one of the few faults from which Isabel suffered was a slight tendency to prevarication, which became more evident in good weather. And the day was a fine one, luminescent and warm, with the wind, such as it was, coming from the south-west, from Dumfries and Galloway, and from the Atlantic before that. Scotland's weather was rarely second-hand, blowing in, as it did, from the west and south-west. So while cities on the continent had to contend with hand-me-down winds from elsewhere, from Italy and North Africa – if they were lucky – or from the Steppes and Siberia if they were not, Scotland's weather was usually entirely its own, freshly minted above the wide plains of empty ocean. Isabel had always thought of it as *white* weather: the white of clouds, of shifting veils of rain, of air that was attenuated to fine mist, of pale light from a hazy sun.

She took a deep breath. There were times when life's problems were convincingly outweighed by its possibilities, and this, she felt, was one. Here she was, in her forties, with a child at a time when many might have felt it was too late for children; blessed, too, with a fiancé whom she would shortly marry; solvent – though she was discreet about that, and generous beyond measure; working for herself – the list of good things, on any view, was a long one. She stopped herself: the making of such an inventory could attract the attention of a Nemesis always sensitive to hubristic thoughts, whose concern it had always been to cut down to size those who got above themselves. But I am not proud of any of this, Isabel said to herself; I am grateful, and that is something quite different. Nemesis, she hoped, had no axe to grind with those who were simply

thankful for good fortune; her objection was to those who thought that they *deserved* what they had and boasted about it.

She had no real reason to go to Bruntsfield: the store cupboard at home was copiously stocked with everything they needed for the coming week; she had nothing to put in the post, or nothing that could not wait until tomorrow; and she did not need to go to a cash machine. But she was in the mood for a walk and for a cup of coffee in Cat's delicatessen. Cat, her niece, had run her food business for several years now and had recently expanded into a small adjoining shop that she had been able to buy at a tempting price. Isabel had offered to lend her the money to make the purchase, but Cat had declined.

'Don't think I'm being ungrateful,' she said. 'But I really want to do this by myself.'

Isabel had explained that there would be no strings attached to the loan and that it would be interest-free; in fact, how about an outright gift? Cat, though, had been adamant.

'It's pride, I suppose,' said Cat. 'I want to prove that I can do this on my own. I hope you don't mind.'

Isabel did not mind at all. Her relationship with her niece was far from simple, and she did not wish to imperil the delicate understanding that they had recently reached. The awkwardness between them had two causes.

First, Isabel was Cat's aunt – even if only fifteen years separated them. Cat's father, Isabel's brother, had distanced himself from the family and had little contact with his own daughter; not for reasons of antipathy, but from a curious, almost absent-minded indifference. Isabel had always felt that Cat blamed her for this; that insofar as she wanted to punish her father, but could not, Isabel would have to do as the focus of her anger.

The second reason for awkwardness was even more understandable. Jamie had been Cat's boyfriend and had eventually

been rejected by her. But then Isabel had taken up with him. She had not planned this turn of events; she had merely continued what had started as a friendship and this had blossomed, very much to her surprise – and delight, it must be said – into something more. Isabel understood why Cat should have been taken aback by this, but had not anticipated that she would be quite so resentful. She had not *stolen* Jamie, and there was, she felt, something of the dog in the manger about Cat's attitude. She might not have wanted Jamie, but did that mean that nobody else could have him? The answer, from Cat's point of view, was probably yes.

The situation had been made worse by Cat's abysmal taste in men. Jamie had been the exception in a rather too long line of flawed boyfriends, ranging from Toby, with his crushed-strawberry cords and his irritating manner, to Bruno, a boastful tightrope-walker who had been revealed to be a wearer of elevator shoes. There was a great deal wrong with Bruno, but the elevator shoes had seemed to point to the presence of something deeply untrustworthy. Isabel had wrestled with herself over this: she was quite prepared to accept that elevator shoes need not say anything negative about the wearer – there were, presumably, entirely meritorious people who resorted to them to gain a few extra inches – and so one could not condemn such shoes out of hand. But there would also be those whose elevator shoes were symptomatic of a chip on the shoulder, an aggressive personality – and Bruno, she felt, was one such.

Bruno had effectively dismissed himself as a boyfriend when he publicly upbraided Cat for causing him to fall off his tightrope – not exactly a high wire, as it had been only three or four feet off the ground at the time. But that was enough to end the relationship, much to Isabel's carefully concealed relief. He had then been followed by a teacher, who had seemed suitable

enough, but who had, perhaps for that very reason, also been dismissed.

Now there was nobody – as far as Isabel knew – and that, she hoped, was how it might be, for a while at least. She did not think of Cat as promiscuous, but at what point, Isabel wondered, might eyebrows be raised as to the frequency of boyfriends? Was a new one each year too many? If one carried on in that way from the age of twenty, by the time one was forty-five one would have had twenty-five boyfriends, which surely was rather too many.

So what was a respectable number of boyfriends over a lifetime? Five? Isabel herself had had . . . For a moment she stopped in her tracks, halfway along Merchiston Crescent, and thought. There had been the rugby player, but he did not count as they had spoken only two or three times and he never knew that she had fallen for him. The first real boyfriend had come a little bit later, just before she left school; a shy boy with that – for her – fatal combination of dark hair and blue eyes, who had kissed her in the darkness of the Dominion Cinema one Saturday afternoon, and had written her the most extraordinary love letter that she still kept, tucked away with her birth certificate. Then there had been John Liamor, her former husband, who had been disastrous, who had broken her heart again and again, and of whom it was still uncomfortable to think, even if she had come to terms with what had happened. Then Jamie. And that was all. Was that typical, she wondered, or might it be considered thin rations?

The important thing, she told herself, was to try to see it from Cat's point of view – and she could certainly do that. Like all of us, she thought, Cat was searching for the company of one who would make her happy. Some of us did not have to look long for that person, some of us found him or her with little

difficulty; others had longer to look, and had less luck. They deserved our sympathy rather than our disapproval.

Passers-by, of whom there were one or two, paid no attention to the sight of a rather handsome-looking woman suddenly stopping and appearing to be lost in thought. Had they done so, they might have concluded that Isabel was trying to remember what she had failed to put on her shopping list; they would not have guessed that she was thinking about the problem of boyfriends. And these passers-by, anyway, were students, making their way to lectures at Napier University near by. And there was never any doubt as to what students – at least the male ones, as these happened to be – thought about on their way to lectures. Sex.

She continued her walk, and five minutes later was standing in front of the delicatessen. Looking inside, through the large display window, she saw that Cat was pointing out something to a customer, while Eddie, her young assistant, was standing behind the counter. He caught Isabel's eye and waved enthusiastically, beckoning her in, in the manner of one who had important news to convey. Eddie was normally shy, but not now; now he had something to tell her.