UNDER THE NET

IRIS MURDOCH

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin of Anglo-Irish parents. She went to Badminton School, Bristol, and read classics at Somerville College, Oxford. During the war she was an Assistant Principal at the Treasury, and then worked with U.N.R.R.A. in London, Belgium and Austria. She held a studentship in philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, for a year, and in 1948 returned to teach philosophy in Oxford as a Fellow of St Anne's College. In 1956 she married John Bayley, teacher and critic. She was awarded the C.B.E. in 1976 and was made a D.B.E. in the 1987 New Year's Honours List.

Her other novels are *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1955), *The Sandcastle* (1957), *The Bell* (1958), *A Severed Head* (1961), *An Unofficial Rose* (1962), *The Unicorn* (1963), *The Italian Girl* (1964), *The Red and the Green* (1965), *The Time of the Angels* (1966), *The Nice and the Good* (1968), *Bruno's Dream* (1969), *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), *An Accidental Man* (1971), *The Black Prince* (1973), winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974), winner of the Whitbread Prize, *A Word Child* (1975), *Henry and Cato* (1976), *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), for which she won the Booker Prize, *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980), *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983), *The Good Apprentice* (1985) and *The Book and the Brotherhood*, both shortlisted for the Booker Prize. She has also written *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artist* (1977), based on her 1976 Romanes lectures, and *A Year of Birds* (1978), a volume of poetry, and *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (1986).

All, all of a piece throughout:
Thy Chase had a Beast in view:
Thy Wars brought nothing about;
Thy Lovers were all untrue.
'Tis well an old Age is out,
And time to begin a New.

DRYDEN, *The Secular Masque*

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One

WHEN I saw Finn waiting for me at the corner of the street I knew at once that something had gone wrong. Finn usually waits for me in bed, or leaning up against the side of the door with his eyes closed. Moreover, I had been delayed by the strike. I hate the journey back to England anyway; and until I have been able to bury my head so deep in dear London that I can forget that I have ever been away I am inconsolable. So you may imagine how unhappy it makes me to have to cool my heels at Newhaven, waiting for the trains to run again, and with the smell of France still fresh in my nostrils. On this occasion too the bottles of cognac which I always smuggle had been taken from me by the Customs, so that when closing time came I was utterly abandoned to the torments of a morbid self-scrutiny. The invigorating objectivity of true contemplation is something which a man of my temperament cannot achieve in unfamiliar towns in England, even when he has not also to be worrying about trains. Trains are bad for the nerves at the best of times. What did people have nightmares about before there were trains? So all this being considered, it was an odd thing that Finn should be waiting for me in the road.

As soon as I saw Finn I stopped and put the cases down. They were full of French books and very heavy. I shouted 'Hey!' and Finn came slowly on. He never makes haste. I find it hard to explain to people about Finn. He isn't exactly my servant. He seems often more like my manager. Sometimes I support him, and sometimes he supports me; it depends. It's somehow clear that we aren't equals. His name is Peter O'Finney, but you needn't mind about that, as he is always called Finn, and he is a sort of remote cousin of mine, or so he used to claim, and I never troubled to verify this. But people do get the impression that he is my servant, and I often have this impression too, though it would be hard to say exactly what features of the situation suggest it. Sometimes I think it is just that Finn is a humble and self-effacing person and so automatically takes second place. When we are short of beds it is always Finn who sleeps on the floor, and this seems thoroughly natural. It is true that I am always giving

Finn orders, but this is because Finn seems not to have many ideas of his own about how to employ his time. Some of my friends think that Finn is cracked, but this is not so; he knows very well indeed what he is about.

When Finn came up to me at last I indicated one of the cases for him to carry, but he did not pick it up. Instead he sat down on it and looked at me in a melancholy way. I sat down on the other case, and for a little while we were silent. I was tired, and reluctant to ask Finn any questions; he would tell all soon enough. He loves trouble, his own or other people's without discrimination, and what he particularly likes is to break bad news. Finn is rather handsome in a sad lanky fashion, with straight drooping brownish hair and a bony Irish face. He is a head taller than me (I am a short man), but he stoops a little. As he looked at me so sadly my heart sank.

'What is it?' I said at last.

'She's thrown us out,' said Finn.

I could not take this seriously; it was impossible.

'Come now,' I said kindly to Finn. 'What does this really mean?'

'She's throwing us out,' said Finn. 'Both of us, now, today.'

Finn is a carrion crow, but he never tells lies, he never even exaggerates. Yet this was fantastic.

'But why?' I asked. 'What have we done?'

'It's not what we've done, it's what she's after doing,' said Finn. 'She's going to get married to a fellow.'

This was a blow. Yet even as I flinched I told myself, well, why not? I am a tolerant and fair-minded man. And next moment I was wondering, where can we go?

'But she never told me anything,' I said.

'You never asked anything,' said Finn.

This was true. During the last year I had become uninterested in Magdalen's private life. If she goes out and gets herself engaged to some other man whom had I to thank but myself?

'Who is this person?' I asked.

'Some bookie fellow,' said Finn.

'Is he rich?'

'Yes, he has a car,' said Finn. This was Finn's criterion, and I think at that time it was mine too.

'Women give me heart disease,' Finn added. He was no gladder than I was at being turned out.

I sat there for a moment, feeling a vague physical pain in which portions of jealousy and wounded pride were compounded with a profound sense of homelessness. Here we were, sitting in Earls Court Road on a dusty sunny July morning on two suitcases, and where were we to go next? This was what always happened. I would be at pains to put my universe in order and set it ticking, when suddenly it would burst again into a mess of the same poor pieces, and Finn and I be on the run. I say my universe, not ours, because I sometimes feel that Finn has very little inner life. I mean no disrespect to him in saying this; some have and some haven't. I connect this too with his truthfulness. Subtle people, like myself, can see too much ever to give a straight answer. Aspects have always been my trouble. And I connect it with his aptness to make objective statements when these are the last things that one wants, like a bright light on one's headache. It may be, though, that Finn misses his inner life, and that that is why he follows me about, as I have a complex one and highly differentiated. Anyhow, I count Finn as an inhabitant of my universe, and cannot conceive that he has one containing me; and this arrangement seems restful for both of us.

It was more than two hours till opening time, and I could hardly face the thought of seeing Magdalen at once. She would expect me to make a scene, and I didn't feel energetic enough to make a scene, quite apart from not knowing anyway what sort of scene I ought to make. That would need some thinking out. There is nothing like being ousted for making one start to specify what it is one is being ousted from. I wanted time to reflect on my status.

'Would you like a cup of coffee in Lyons'?' I said to Finn hopefully.

'I would not,' said Finn; 'I'm destroyed already waiting for you to come back, and herself wishing me at the devil. Come on now and see her.' And he started off down the street. Finn never refers to people otherwise than by pronouns or vocatives. I followed him slowly, trying to work out who I was.

Magdalen lived in one of those repulsive heavy-weight houses

in Earls Court Road. She had the top half of the house; and there I had lived too for more than eighteen months, and Finn as well. Finn and I lived on the fourth floor in a maze of attics, and Magdalen lived on the third floor, though I don't say we didn't see a lot of each other, at any rate at first. I had begun to feel that this was my home. Sometimes Magdalen had boy friends, I didn't mind and I didn't inquire. I preferred it when she had, as then I had more time for work, or rather for the sort of dreamy unlucrative reflection which is what I enjoy more than anything in the world. We had lived there as snug as a pair of walnuts in their shells. We had also lived there practically rent-free, which was another point. There's nothing that irritates me so much as paying rent.

Magdalen, I should explain, is a typist in the city, or she was at the time of the earlier events related in this story. This hardly describes her, however. Her real employment is to be herself, and to this she devotes a tremendous zeal and artistry. Her exertions are directed along the lines suggested to her by women's magazines and the cinema, and it is due simply to some spring of native and incorruptible vitality in her that she has not succeeded in rendering herself quite featureless in spite of having made the prevailing conventions of seduction her constant study. She is not beautiful: that is an adjective which I use sparingly; but she is both pretty and attractive. Her prettiness lies in her regular features and fine complexion, which she covers over with a peach-like mask of make-up until all is as smooth and inexpressive as alabaster. Her hair is permanently waved in whatever fashion is declared to be the most becoming. It is a dyed gold. Women think that beauty lies in approximation to a harmonious norm. The only reason why they fail to make themselves indistinguishably similar is that they lack the time and the money and the technique. Film stars, who have all these, *are* indistinguishably similar. Magdalen's attractiveness lies in her eyes, and in the vitality of her manner and expression. The eyes are the one part of the face which nothing can disguise, or at any rate nothing which has been invented yet. The eyes are the mirror of the soul, and you can't paint them over or even sprinkle them with gold dust. Magdalen's are big and grey and almond-shaped, and glisten like pebbles in the rain. She makes a lot of money from time to time, not by

tapping on the typewriter, but by being a photographer's model; she is everyone's idea of a pretty girl.

Magdalen was in the bath when we arrived. We went into her sitting-room, where the electric fire and the little piles of nylon stockings and silk underwear and the smell of face-powder made a cosy scene. Finn slumped on to the tousled divan in the way she always asked him not to. I went to the bathroom door and shouted 'Madge!'

The splashing ceased, and she said, 'Is that you, Jake?' The cistern was making an infernal noise.

'Yes, of course, it's me. Look, what is all this?'

'I can't hear you,' said Magdalen. 'Wait a moment.'

'What is all this?' I shouted. 'All this about your marrying a bookie? You can't do this without consulting me!'

I felt I was making a passable scene outside the bathroom door. I even banged on the panel.

'I can't hear a word,' said Madge. This was untrue; she was playing for time. 'Jake, dear, do put the kettle on and we'll have some coffee. I'll be out in a minute.'

Magdalen swept out of the bathroom with a blast of hot perfumed air just as I was making the coffee, but dodged straight into her dressing-room. Finn got up hastily from the divan. We lit cigarettes and waited. Then after a long time Magdalen emerged resplendent, and stood before me. I stared at her in quiet amazement. A marked change had taken place in her whole appearance. She was wearing a tight silk dress, of an expensive and fussy cut, and a great deal of rather dear-looking jewellery. Even the expression on her face seemed to have altered. Now at last I was able to take in what Finn had told me. Walking down the road I had been too full of self-concern to reflect upon the oddness and enormity of Madge's plan. Now its cash value was before me. It was certainly unexpected. Madge was used to consort with tedious but humane city men, or civil servants with Bohemian tastes, or at worst with literary hacks like myself. I wondered what curious fault in the social stratification should have brought her into contact with a man who could inspire her to dress like that. I walked slowly round her, taking it all in.

'What do you think I am, the Albert Memorial?' said Magdalen.

'Not with those eyes,' I said, and I looked into their speckled depths.

Then an unaccustomed pain shot through me and I had to turn away. I ought to have taken better care of the girl. This metamorphosis must have been a long time preparing, only I had been too dull to see it. A girl like Magdalen can't be transformed overnight. Someone had been hard at work.

Madge watched me curiously. 'What's the matter?' she asked. 'Are you ill?'

I spoke my thought. 'Madge, I ought to have looked after you better.'

'You didn't look after me at all,' said Madge. 'Now someone else will.'

Her laughter had a cutting edge, but her eyes were troubled, and I felt an impulse to make her, even at this late stage, some sort of rash proposal. A strange light, cast back over our friendship, brought new things into relief, and I tried in an instant to grasp the whole essence of my need of her. I took a deep breath, however, and followed my rule of never speaking frankly to women in moments of emotion. No good ever comes of this. It is not in my nature to make myself responsible for other people. I find it hard enough to pick my own way along. The dangerous moment passed, the signal was gone, the gleam in Magdalen's eye disappeared and she said, 'Give me some coffee.' I gave her some.

'Now look, Jakie,' she said, 'you understand how it is. I want you to move your stuff out as soon as poss, today if you can. I've put all your things in your room.'

She had too. Various objects of mine which usually decorated the sitting-room were missing. Already I felt I didn't live there any more.

'I don't understand how it is,' I said, 'and I shall be interested to hear.'

'Yes, you must take *everything*,' said Magdalen. 'I'll pay for the taxi if you like.' Now she was as cool as a lettuce.

'Have a heart, Madge,' I said. I was beginning to worry about myself again, and felt a lot better. 'Can't I go on living upstairs? I'm not in the way.' But I knew this was a bad idea.

'Oh, Jake!' said Madge. 'You are an imbecile!' This was the kindest remark she had made yet. We both relaxed.

All this time Finn had been leaning against the door, looking abstractedly into the middle distance. Whether he was listening or not it was hard to tell.

'Send him away,' said Magdalen. 'He gives me the creeps.'

'Where can I send him to?' I asked. 'Where can we either of us go? You know I've got no money.'

This was not strictly true, but I always pretend as a matter of policy to be penniless, one never knows when it may not turn out to be useful for this to be taken for granted.

'You're adults,' said Magdalen. 'At least, you're supposed to be. You can decide that for yourselves.'

I met Finn's dreamy gaze. 'What shall we do?' I asked him.

Finn sometimes has ideas, and after all he had had more time to reflect than I had.

'Go to Dave's,' he said.

I could see nothing against that, so I said 'Good!' and shouted after him, 'Take the cases!' for he had shot off like an arrow. I sometimes think he doesn't care for Magdalen. He came back and took one of them and vanished.

Magdalen and I looked at each other like boxers at the beginning of the second round.

'Look here, Madge,' I said, 'you can't turn me out just like that.'

'You arrived just like that,' said Madge.

It was true. I sighed.

'Come here,' I told her, and held out my hand. She gave me hers, but it remained as stiff and unresponsive as a toasting-fork, and after a moment or two I released it.

'Don't make a scene, Jakie,' said Madge.

I couldn't have made even a little one at that moment. I felt weak, and lay down on the divan.

'Eh, eh!' I said gently. 'So you're putting me out, and all for a man that lives on other people's vices.'

'We all live on other people's vices,' said Madge with an air of up-to-date cynicism which didn't suit her. 'I do, you do, and you live on worse ones than he does.' This was a reference to the sort of books I sometimes translated.

'Who is this character, anyway?' I asked her.

Madge scanned me, watching for the effect. 'His name,' she

said, 'is Starfield. You may have heard of him.' A triumphant look blazed without shame in her eye.

I hardened my face to make it expressionless. So it was Starfield, Samuel Starfield, Sacred Sammy, the diamond bookmaker. To describe him as a bookie had been a bit picturesque on Finn's part, although he still had his offices near Piccadilly and his name in lights. Starfield now did a bit of everything in those regions where his tastes and his money could take him: women's clothes, night clubs, the film business, the restaurant business.

'I see,' I said. I wasn't going to put on a show for Madge. 'Where did you meet him? I ask this question in a purely sociological spirit.'

'I don't know what that means,' said Madge. 'If you must know, I met him on a number eleven bus.' This was clearly a lie. I shook my head over it.

'You're enlisting for life as a mannequin,' I said. 'You'll have to spend all your time being a symbol of conspicuous wealth.' And it occurred to me as I said it that it mightn't be such a bad life at that.

'Jake, will you get out!' said Magdalen.

'Anyhow,' I said, 'you aren't going to live *here* with Sacred Sam, are you?'

'We shall need this flat,' said Magdalen, 'and I want you out of it now.'

I thought her answer was evasive. 'Did you say you were getting *married*?' I asked. I began to have the feeling of responsibility again. After all, she had no father, and I felt *in loco parentis*. It was about the only locus I had left. And it seemed to me, now that I came to think of it, somehow fantastically unlikely that Starfield would marry a girl like Magdalen. Madge would do to hang fur coats on as well as any other female clothes-horse. But she wasn't flashy, any more than she was rich or famous. She was a nice healthy English girl, as simple and sweet as May Day at Kew. But I imagined Starfield's tastes as being more exotic and far from matrimonial. '*Yes*,' said Madge with emphasis, still as fresh as cream. 'And now will you start packing?' She had a bad conscience, though, I could see from the way she avoided my eye.

She started fiddling with the bookshelves, saying, 'I think there

are some books of yours here,' and she took out *Murphy* and *Pierrot Mon Ami*.

'Making room for comrade Starfield,' I said. 'Can he read? And by the way, does he know I exist?'

'Well, yes,' said Magdalen evasively, 'but I don't want you to meet. That's why you must pack up at once. From tomorrow onward Sammy will be here a lot.'

'One thing's certain,' I said, 'I can't move everything in a day. I'll take some things now, but I'll have to come back tomorrow.' I hate being hurried. 'And don't forget,' I added fervently, 'that the radiogram is *mine*.' My thoughts kept reverting to Lloyds Bank Limited.

'Yes, dear,' said Madge, 'but if you come back after today, telephone first, and if it's a man, ring off.'

'This disgusts me,' I said.

'Yes, dear,' said Madge. 'Shall I order a taxi?'

'No!' I shouted, leaving the room.

'If you come back when Sammy's here,' Magdalen called after me up the stairs, 'he'll break your neck.'

* * *

I took the other suitcase, and packed up my manuscripts in a brown-paper parcel, and left on foot. I needed to think, and I can never think in a taxi for looking at the cash meter. I took a number seventy-three bus, and went to Mrs Tinckham's. Mrs Tinckham keeps a newspaper shop in the neighbourhood of Charlotte Street. It's a dusty, dirty, nasty-looking corner shop, with a cheap advertisement board outside it, and it sells papers in various languages, and women's magazines, and Westerns and Science fiction and Amazing Stories. At least these articles are displayed for sale in chaotic piles, though I have never seen anyone buy anything in Mrs Tinckham's shop except ice cream, which is also for sale, and the *Evening News*. Most of the literature lies there year after year, fading in the sun, and is only disturbed when Mrs Tinckham herself has a fit of reading, which she does from time to time, and picks out some Western, yellow with age, only to declare half-way through that she's read it before but had quite forgotten. She must by now have read the whole of her stock, which is limited and slow to increase. I've seen her sometimes looking at French

newspapers, though she professes not to know French, but perhaps she is just looking at the pictures. Besides the ice-cream container there is a little iron table and two chairs, and on a shelf above there are red and green non-alcoholic drinks in bottles. Here I have spent many peaceful hours.

Another peculiarity of Mrs Tinckham's shop is that it is full of cats. An ever-increasing family of tabbies, sprung from one enormous matriarch, sit about upon the counter and on the empty shelves, somnolent and contemplative, their amber eyes narrowed and winking in the sun, a reluctant slit of liquid in an expanse of hot fur. When I come in, one often leaps down and on to my knee, where it sits for a while in a sedate objective way, before slinking into the street and along by the shop fronts. But I have never met one of these animals farther than ten yards away from the shop. In the midst sits Mrs Tinckham herself, smoking a cigarette. She is the only person I know who is literally a chain-smoker. She lights each one from the butt of the last; how she lights the first one of the day remains to me a mystery, for she never seems to have any matches in the house when I ask her for one. I once arrived to find her in great distress because her current cigarette had fallen into a cup of coffee and she had no fire to light another. Perhaps she smokes all night, or perhaps there is an undying cigarette which burns eternally in her bedroom. An enamel basin at her feet is filled, usually to overflowing, with cigarette ends; and beside her on the counter is a little wireless which is always on, very softly and inaudibly, so that a sort of murmurous music accompanies Mrs Tinckham as she sits, wreathed in cigarette smoke, among the cats.

I came in and sat down as usual at the iron table, and lifted a cat from the nearest shelf on to my knee. Like a machine set in motion it began to purr. I gave Mrs Tinckham my first spontaneous smile of the day. She is what Finn calls a funny old specimen, but she has been very kind to me, and I never forget kindness.

'Well, now, back again,' said Mrs Tinckham, laying aside *Amazing Stories*, and she turned the wireless down a bit more until it was just a mumble in the background.

'Yes, unfortunately,' I said. 'Mrs Tinck, what about a glass of something?'