The Fifth Child

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HARRIET AND DAVID met each other at an office party neither had particularly wanted to go to, and both knew at once that this was what they had been waiting for. Someone conservative, old-fashioned, not to say obsolescent; timid, hard to please: this is what other people called them, but there was no end to the unaffectionate adjectives they earned. They defended a stubbornly held view of themselves, which was that they were ordinary and in the right of it, should not be criticised for emotional fastidiousness, abstemiousness, just because these were unfashionable qualities.

At this famous office party, about two hundred people crammed into a long, ornate, and solemn room, for three hundred and thirty-four days of the year a boardroom. Three associated firms, all to do with putting up buildings, were having their end-of-year party. It was noisy. The pounding rhythm of a small band shook walls and floor. Most people were dancing, packed close because of lack of space, couples bobbing up and down or revolving in one spot as if they were on invisible turntables. The women were dressed up, dramatic, bizarre, full of colour: *Look at me! Look at me!* Some of the men demanded as much attention. Around the walls were pressed a few non-dancers, and among these were Harriet and David, standing by them-

selves, holding glasses—observers. Both had reflected that the faces of the dancers, women more than men, but men, too, could just as well have been distorted in screams and grimaces of pain as in enjoyment. There was a forced hecticity to the scene . . . but these thoughts, like so many others, they had not expected to share with anyone else.

From across the room—if one saw her at all among so many eye-demanding people—Harriet was a pastel blur. As in an Impressionist picture, or a trick photograph, she seemed a girl merged with her surroundings. She stood near a great vase of dried grasses and leaves and her dress was something flowery. The focussing eye then saw curly dark hair, which was unfashionable . . . blue eyes, soft but thoughtful . . . lips rather too firmly closed. In fact, all her features were strong and good, and she was solidly built. A healthy young woman, but perhaps more at home in a garden?

David had been standing just where he was for an hour drinking judiciously, his serious grey-blue eyes taking their time over this person, that couple, watching how people engaged and separated, ricochetting off each other. To Harriet he did not have the look of someone solidly planted: he seemed almost to hover, balancing on the balls of his feet. A slight young man—he looked younger than he was—he had a round, candid face and soft brown hair girls longed to run their fingers through, but then that contemplative gaze of his made itself felt and they desisted. He made them feel uncomfortable. Not Harriet. She knew his look of watchful apartness mirrored her own. She judged his humorous air to be an effort. He was making similar mental comments about her: she seemed to dislike these occasions as much as he did. Both had found out who the other was. Harriet was in the sales department of a firm that designed and supplied building materials; David was an architect.

So what was it about these two that made them freaks and oddballs? It was their attitude to sex! This was the sixties! David

had had one long and difficult affair with a girl he was reluctantly in love with: she was what he did *not* want in a girl. They joked about the attraction between opposites. She joked that he thought of reforming her: "I do believe *you* imagine you are going to put the clock back, starting with me!" Since they had parted, unhappily enough, she had slept—so David reckoned—with everyone in Sissons Blend & Co. With the girls, too, he wouldn't be surprised. She was here tonight, in a scarlet dress with black lace, a witty travesty of a flamenco dress. From this concoction her head startlingly emerged. It was pure nineteen-twenties, for her black hair was sleeked down into a spike on her neck at the back, with two glossy black spikes over her ears, and a black lock on her forehead. She sent frantic waves and kisses to David from across the room where she circled with her partner, and he smiled matily back: no hard feelings. As for Harriet, she was a virgin. "A virgin *now*," her girl friends might shriek; "are you crazy?" She had not thought of herself as a virgin, if this meant a physiological condition to be defended, but rather as something like a present wrapped up in layers of deliciously pretty paper, to be given, with discretion, to the right person. Her own sisters laughed at her. The girls working in the office looked studiedly humorous when she insisted, "I am sorry, I don't like all this sleeping around, it's not for me." She knew she was discussed as an always interesting subject, and usually unkindly. With the same chilly contempt that good women of her grandmother's generation might have used, saying, "She is quite immoral you know," or, "She's no better than she ought to be," or, "She hasn't got a moral to her name"; then (her mother's generation), "She's man-mad," or, "She's a nympho"—so did the enlightened girls of now say to each other, "It must be something in her childhood that's made her like this. Poor thing."

And indeed she had sometimes felt herself unfortunate or deficient in some way, because the men with whom she went

out for a meal or to the cinema would take her refusal as much as evidence of a pathological outlook as an ungenerous one. She had gone about with a girl friend, younger than the others, for a time, but then this one had become "like all the others," as Harriet despairingly defined her, defining herself as a misfit. She spent many evenings alone, and went home often at week-ends to her mother. Who said, "Well, you're old-fashioned, that's all. And a lot of girls would like to be, if they got the chance."

These two eccentrics, Harriet and David, set off from their respective corners towards each other at the same moment: this was to be important to them as the famous office party became part of their story. "Yes, at exactly the same time . . ." They had to push past people already squeezed against walls; they held their glasses high above their heads to keep them out of the way of the dancers. And so they arrived together at last, smiling—but perhaps a trifle anxiously—and he took her hand and they squeezed their way out of this room into the next, which had the buffet and was as full of noisy people, and through that into a corridor, sparsely populated with embracing couples, and then pushed open the first door whose handle yielded to them. It was an office that had a desk and hard chairs, and, as well, a sofa. Silence . . . well, almost. They sighed. They set down their glasses. They sat facing each other, so they might look as much as they wished, and then began to talk. They talked as if talk were what had been denied to them both, as if they were starving for talk. And they went on sitting there, close, talking, until the noise began to lessen in the rooms across the corridor, and then they went quietly out and to his flat, which was near. There they lay on his bed holding hands and talked, and sometimes kissed, and then slept. Almost at once she moved into his flat, for she had been able to afford only a room in a big communal flat. They had already decided to marry in the spring. Why wait? They were made for each other.

Harriet was the oldest of three daughters. It was not until she left home, at eighteen, that she knew how much she owed to her childhood, for many of her friends had divorced parents, led adventitious and haphazard lives, and tended to be, as it is put, disturbed. Harriet was not disturbed, and had always known what she wanted. She had done well enough at school, and went to an arts college where she became a graphic designer, which seemed an agreeable way of spending her time until she married. The question whether to be, or not to be, a career woman had never bothered her, though she was prepared to discuss it: she did not like to appear more eccentric than she had to be. Her mother was a contented woman who had everything she could reasonably want; so it appeared to her and to her daughters. Harriet's parents had taken it for granted that family life was the basis for a happy one.

David's background was a quite different matter. His parents had divorced when he was seven. He joked, far too often, that he had two sets of parents: he had been one of the children with a room in two homes, and everybody considerate about psychological problems. There had been no nastiness or spite, if plenty of discomfort, even unhappiness—that is, for the children. His mother's second husband, David's other father, was an academic, an historian, and there was a large shabby house in Oxford. David liked this man, Frederick Burke, who was kind, if remote, like his mother, who was kind and remote. His room in this house had been his home—was, in his imagination, his real home now, though soon, with Harriet, he would create another, an extension and amplification of it. This home of his was a large bedroom at the back of the house overlooking a neglected garden; a shabby room, full of his boyhood, and rather chilly, in the English manner. His real father married one of his kind: she was a noisy, kind, competent woman, with the cynical good humour of the rich. James Lovatt was a boat builder, and when David did consent to visit, his place could

easily be a bunk on a yacht, or a room ("This is *your* room, David!") in a villa in the South of France or the West Indies. But he preferred his old room in Oxford. He had grown up with a fierce private demand on his future: for his own children it would all be different. He knew what he wanted, and the kind of woman he needed. If Harriet had seen her future in the old way, that a man would hand her the keys of her kingdom, and there she would find everything her nature demanded, and this as her birthright, which she had—at first unknowingly, but then very determinedly—been travelling towards, refusing all muddles and dramas, then he saw his future as something he must aim for and protect. His wife must be like him in this: that she knew where happiness lay and how to keep it. He was thirty when he met Harriet, and he had been working in the dogged disciplined manner of an ambitious man: but what he was working for was a home.

Not possible to find the kind of house they wanted, for the life they wanted, in London. Anyway, they were not sure London was what they needed—no, it wasn't, they would prefer a smallish town with an atmosphere of its own. Weekends were spent looking around towns within commuting distance of London, and they soon found a large Victorian house in an overgrown garden. Perfect! But for a young couple it was absurd, a three-storeyed house, with an attic, full of rooms, corridors, landings. . . . Full of space for children, in fact.

But they meant to have a lot of children. Both, somewhat defiantly, because of the enormity of their demands on the future, announced they "would not mind" a lot of children. "Even four, or five . . ." "Or six," said David. "Or six!" said Harriet, laughing to the point of tears from relief. They had laughed and rolled about the bed and kissed and were exuberant because this, the place where both had expected and even been prepared to accept rebuff or a compromise, had turned out to be no danger at all. But while Harriet could say to David, David

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to Harriet, "Six children at least," they could not say this to anyone else. Even with David's quite decent salary, and Harriet's, the mortgage of this house would be beyond them. But they would manage somehow. She would work for two years, commute with David daily to London, and then . . .

On the afternoon the house became theirs, they stood hand in hand in the little porch, birds singing all around them in the garden where boughs were still black and glistening with the chilly rain of early spring. They unlocked their front door, their hearts thudding with happiness, and stood in a very large room, facing capacious stairs. Some previous owner had seen a home as they did. Walls had been pulled down to make this a room that accommodated nearly all the ground floor. One half of it was a kitchen, marked off from the rest by no more than a low wall that would have books on it, the other half with plenty of space for settees, chairs, all the sprawl and comfort of a family room. They went gently, softly, hardly breathing, smiling and looking at each other and smiling even more because both had tears in their eyes—they went across the bare boards that soon would have rugs on them, and then slowly up the stairs where old-fashioned brass rods waited for a carpet. On the landing, they turned to marvel at the great room that would be the heart of their kingdom. They went on up. The first floor had one large bedroom—theirs; and opening off it a smallish room, which would be for each new baby. There were four other decent rooms on this floor. Up still generous but narrower stairs, and there were four more rooms whose windows, like the rooms below, showed trees, gardens, lawns—all the perspectives of pleasant suburbia. And above this floor was an enormous attic, just right for the children when they had got to the age for secret magical games.

They slowly descended the stairs, one flight, two, passing rooms, and rooms, which they were imagining full of children, relatives, guests, and came again into their bedroom. A large

bed had been left in it. It had been specially made, that bed, for the couple they had bought the house from. To take it away, so said the agent, would have meant dismantling it, and anyway the owners of the bed were going to live abroad. There Harriet and David lay down side by side, and looked at their room. They were quiet, awed by what they were taking on. Shadows from a lilac tree, a wet sun behind it, seemed to be enticingly sketching on the expanses of the ceiling the years they would live in this house. They turned their heads towards the windows where the top of the old lilac showed its vigorous buds, soon to burst into flower. Then they looked at each other. Tears ran down their cheeks. They made love, there, on their bed. Harriet almost cried out, "No, stop! What are we doing?" For had they not decided to put off having children for two years? But she was overwhelmed by his purpose—yes, that was it, he was making love with a deliberate, concentrated intensity, looking into her eyes, that made her accept him, his taking possession of the future in her. She did not have cóntraceptives with her. (Both of course distrusted the Pill.) She was at the height of her fertility. But they made love, with this solemn deliberation. Once. Twice. Later, when the room was dark, they made love again.

"*Well*," said Harriet, in a little voice, for she was frightened and determined not to show it, "Well, that's done it, I'm sure."

He laughed. A loud, reckless, unscrupulous laugh, quite unlike modest, humorous, judicious David. Now the room was quite dark, it looked vast, like a black cave that had no end. A branch scraped across a wall somewhere close. There was a smell of cold rainy earth and sex. David lay smiling to himself, and when he felt her look, he turned his head slightly and his smile included her. But on his terms; his eyes gleamed with thoughts she could not guess at. She felt she did not know him. . . . "David," she said quickly, to break the spell, but his arm tightened around her, and he gripped her upper arm with a

hand she had not believed could be so strong, insistent. This grip said, Be quiet.

They lay there together while ordinariness slowly came back, and then they were able to turn to each other and kiss with small reassuring daytime kisses. They got up and dressed in the cold dark: the electricity wasn't on yet. Quietly they went down the stairs of their house where they had so thoroughly taken possession, and into their great family room, and let themselves out into the garden that was mysterious and hidden from them, not yet theirs.

"Well?" said Harriet humorously as they got into his car to return to London. "And how are we going to pay for it all if I am pregnant?"

Quite so: how were they? Harriet indeed became pregnant on that rainy evening in their bedroom. They had many bad moments, thinking of the slenderness of their resources, and of their own frailty. For at such times, when material support is not enough, it is as if we are being judged: Harriet and David seemed to themselves meagre and inadequate, with nothing to hold on to but stubborn beliefs other people had always judged as wrong-headed.

David had never taken money from his well-off father and stepmother, who had paid for his education, but that was all. (And for his sister Deborah's education; but she had preferred her father's way of life as he had preferred his mother's, and so they had not often met, and the differences between brother and sister seemed to him summed up in this—that she had chosen the life of the rich.) He did not now want to ask for money. His English parents—which was how he thought of his mother and her husband—had little money, being unambitious academics.

One afternoon, these four—David and Harriet, David's mother, Molly, with Frederick—stood in the family room by the stairs

and surveyed the new kingdom. There was by now a very large table, which would easily accommodate fifteen or twenty people, at the kitchen end; there were a couple of vast sofas, and some commodious armchairs bought second-hand at a local auction. David and Harriet stood together, feeling themselves even more preposterously eccentric, and much too young, faced with these two elderly people who judged them. Molly and Frederick were large and untidy, with a great deal of grey hair, wearing comfortable clothes that complacently despised fashion. They looked like benevolent haystacks, but were *not* looking at each other in a way David knew well.

"All right, then," he said humorously, unable to bear the strain, "you can say it." And he put his arm around Harriet, who was pale and strained because of morning sickness and because she had spent a week scrubbing floors and washing windows.

"Are you going to run a hotel?" enquired Frederick reasonably, determined not to make a judgement.

"How many children are you intending to have?" asked Molly, with the short laugh that means there is no point in protesting.

"A lot," said David softly.

"Yes," said Harriet. "Yes." She did not realise, as David did, how annoyed these two parents were. Aiming, like all their kind, at an appearance of unconformity, they were in fact the essence of convention, and disliked any manifestation of the spirit of exaggeration, of excess. This house was that.

"Come on, we'll give you dinner, if there is a decent hotel," said David's mother.

Over that meal, other subjects were discussed until, over coffee, Molly observed, "You do realise that you are going to have to ask your father for help?"

David seemed to wince and suffer, but he had to face it: what mattered was the house and the life that would be lived in it. A life that—both parents knew because of his look of determined

intention, which they judged full of the smugness of youth—was going to annul, absolve, cancel out all the deficiencies of their life, Molly's and Frederick's; and of James's and Jessica's life, too.

As they separated in the dark car-park of the hotel, Frederick said, "As far as I am concerned, you are both rather mad. Well, wrong-headed, then."

"Yes," said Molly. "You haven't really thought it out. Children . . . no one who hasn't had them knows what work they make."

Here David laughed, making a point—and an old one, which Molly recognised, and faced, with a conscious laugh. "You are not maternal," said David. "It's not your nature. But Harriet is."

"Very well," said Molly, "it's your life."

She telephoned James, her first husband, who was on a yacht near the Isle of Wight. This conversation ended with "I think you should come and see for yourself."

"Very well, I will," said he, agreeing as much to what had not been said as to what had: his difficulty in keeping up with his wife's unspoken languages was the main reason he had been pleased to leave her.

Soon after this conversation, David and Harriet again stood with David's parents—the other pair—in contemplation of the house. This time they were outside it. Jessica stood in the middle of a lawn still covered with the woody debris of the winter and a windy spring, and critically surveyed the house. To her it was gloomy and detestable, like England. She was the same age as Molly and looked twenty years younger, being lean and brown and seeming to glisten with sun oil even when her skin was without it. Her hair was yellow and short and shiny and her clothes bright. She dug the heels of her jade-green shoes in the lawn and looked at her husband, James.

He had already been over the house and now he said, as David had expected, "It's a good investment."

"Yes," said David.

"It's not overpriced. I suppose that's because it's too big for most people. I take it the surveyor's report was all right?"

"Yes," said David.

"In that case I shall assume responsibility for the mortgage. How long is it going to take to pay off?"

"Thirty years," said David.

"I'll be dead by then, I expect. Well, I didn't give you much in the way of a wedding present."

"You'll have to do the same by Deborah," said Jessica.

"We have already done much more for Deborah than for David," said James. "Anyway, we can afford it."

She laughed, and shrugged: it was mostly her money. This ease with money characterised their life together, which David had sampled and rejected fiercely, preferring the parsimony of the Oxford house—though he had never used that word aloud. Flashy and too easy, that was the life of the rich; but now he was going to be beholden to it.

"And how many kids are you planning, if one may ask?" enquired Jessica, looking like a parakeet perched on that damp lawn.

"A lot," said David.

"A lot," said Harriet.

"Rather you than me, then," said Jessica, and with that David's other parents left the garden, and then England, with relief.

Now entered on to this scene Dorothy, Harriet's mother. It occurred to neither Harriet nor David to think, or say, "Oh God, how awful, having one's mother around all the time," for if family life was what they had chosen, then it followed that Dorothy should come indefinitely to help Harriet, while insisting that she had a life of her own to which she must return. She was a widow, and this life of hers was mostly visiting her daughters. The family house was sold, and she had a small flat,

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