



THE COMFORT  
OF STRANGERS  
Ian McEwan

'Haunting and compelling' *THE TIMES*

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VINTAGE

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## THE COMFORT OF STRANGERS

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Ian McEwan has written two collections of short stories, *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *In Between The Sheets*, and nine novels, *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *The Daydreamer*, *Enduring Love* and *Atonement*. He won the 1998 Booker Prize for his novel *Amsterdam*. He has also written several film scripts, including *The Imitation Game*, *The Ploughman's Lunch*, *Sour Sweet*, *The Good Son* and *The Innocent*.

BY IAN McEWAN

*First Love, Last Rites*

*In Between the Sheets*

*The Cement Garden*

*The Comfort of Strangers*

*The Child in Time*

*The Innocent*

*Black Dogs*

*The Daydreamer*

*Enduring Love*

*Amsterdam*

*Atonement*

*The Imitation Game*

(plays for television)

*Or Shall We Die?*

(libretto for oratorio by Michael Berkeley)

*The Ploughman's Lunch*

(film script)

*Sour Sweet*

(film script)

how we dwelt in two worlds  
the daughters and the mothers  
in the kingdom of the sons

Adrienne Rich

Travelling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. Nothing is yours except the essential things – air, sleep, dreams, the sea, the sky – all things tending towards the eternal or what we imagine of it.

Cesare Pavese

# I

EACH AFTERNOON, when the whole city beyond the dark green shutters of their hotel windows began to stir, Colin and Mary were woken by the methodical chipping of steel tools against the iron barges which moored by the hotel café pontoon. In the morning these rusting, pitted hulks, with no visible cargo or means of propulsion, would be gone; towards the end of each day they reappeared, and their crews set to inexplicably with their mallets and chisels. It was at this time, in the clouded, late afternoon heat, that customers began to gather on the pontoon to eat ice cream at the tin tables, and their voices too filled the darkened hotel room, rising and falling in waves of laughter and dissent, flooding the brief silences between each piercing blow of the hammers.

They woke, so it seemed to them, simultaneously, and lay still on their separate beds. For reasons they could no longer define clearly, Colin and Mary were not on speaking terms. Two flies gyrated lazily round the ceiling light, along the corridor a key turned in a lock and footsteps advanced and receded. At last, Colin rose, pushed the shutters ajar and went to the bathroom to shower. Still absorbed in the aftermath of her dreams, Mary turned on her side as he passed and stared at the wall. The steady trickle of water next door made a soothing sound, and she closed her eyes once more.

Each evening, in the ritual hour they spent on their balcony before setting out to find a restaurant, they had been listening patiently to the other's dreams in exchange for the luxury of recounting their own. Colin's dreams were those that psychoanalysts recommend, of flying, he said, of crumbling teeth, of appearing naked before a seated stranger. For Mary the hard



mattress, the unaccustomed heat, the barely explored city were combining to set loose in her sleep a turmoil of noisy, argumentative dreams which, she complained, numbed her waking hours; and the fine old churches, the altar-pieces, the stone bridges over canals, fell dully on her retina, as on a distant screen. She dreamed most frequently of her children, that they were in danger, and that she was too incompetent or muddled to help them. Her own childhood became confused with theirs. Her son and daughter were her contemporaries, frightening her with their insistent questions. Why did you go away without us? When are you coming back? Will you meet us off the train? No, no, she tried to tell them, you are meant to be meeting *me*. She told Colin that she dreamed her children had climbed into bed with her, one on either side, and there they lay, bickering all night over her sleeping body. Yes I did. No you didn't. I told you. No you didn't . . . until she woke exhausted, her hands pressed tight against her ears. Or, she said, her ex-husband steered her into a corner and began to explain patiently, as he once had, how to operate his expensive Japanese camera, testing her on its intricacies at every stage. After many hours she started to sigh and moan, begging him to stop, but nothing could interrupt the relentless drone of explanation.

The bathroom window gave on to a courtyard and at this hour it too came alive with sounds from adjacent rooms and the hotel kitchens. The moment Colin turned his shower off, the man across the way under his shower began, as on the previous evenings, to sing his duet from *The Magic Flute*. His voice rising above the torrential thunder of water and the smack and squelch of well-soaped skin, the man sang with the total abandon of one who believes himself to be without an audience, cracking and yodelling the higher notes, tra-laling the forgotten words, bellowing out the orchestral parts. '*Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann*, Together make a godly span.' When the shower was turned off, the singing subsided to a whistle.

Colin stood in front of the mirror, listening, and for no particular reason began to shave for the second time that day. Since their arrival, they had established a well-ordered ritual

of sleep, preceded on only one occasion by sex, and now the calm, self-obsessed interlude during which they carefully groomed themselves before their dinner-time stroll through the city. In this time of preparation, they moved slowly and rarely spoke. They used expensive, duty-free colognes and powders on their bodies, they chose their clothes meticulously and without consulting the other, as though somewhere among the thousands they were soon to join, there waited someone who cared deeply how they appeared. While Mary did her yoga on the bedroom floor, Colin would roll a marihuana joint which they would smoke on their balcony and which would enhance that delightful moment when they stepped out of the hotel lobby into the creamy evening air.

While they were out, and not only in the mornings, a maid came and tidied the beds, or removed the sheets, if she thought that was necessary. Unused to hotel life, they were inhibited by this intimacy with a stranger they rarely saw. The maid took away used paper tissues, she lined up their shoes in the cupboard in a tidy row, she folded their dirty clothes into a neat pile on a chair and arranged loose change into little stacks along the bedside table. Rapidly, however, they came to depend on her and grew lazy with their possessions. They became incapable of looking after one another, incapable, in this heat, of plumping their own pillows, or of bending down to retrieve a dropped towel. At the same time they had become less tolerant of disorder. One late morning, they returned to their room to find it as they had left it, simply uninhabitable, and they had no choice but to go out again and wait until it had been dealt with.

The hours before their afternoon sleep were equally well-defined, though less predictable. It was mid-summer, and the city overflowed with visitors. Colin and Mary set out each morning after breakfast with their money, sunglasses and maps, and joined the crowds who swarmed across the canal bridges and down every narrow street. They dutifully fulfilled the many tasks of tourism the ancient city imposed, visiting its major and minor churches, its museums and palaces, all treasure-packed. In the shopping streets they spent time in front of window displays, discussing presents they might buy.

So far, they had yet to enter a shop. Despite the maps, they frequently became lost, and could spend an hour or so doubling back and round, consulting (Colin's trick) the position of the sun, to find themselves approaching a familiar landmark from an unexpected direction, and still lost. When the going was particularly hard, and the heat more than usually oppressive, they reminded each other, sardonically, that they were 'on holiday'. They passed many hours searching for 'ideal' restaurants, or relocating the restaurant of two days before. Frequently, the ideal restaurants were full or, if it was past nine o'clock in the evening, just closing; if they passed one that wasn't, they sometimes ate in it long before they were hungry.

Alone, perhaps, they each could have explored the city with pleasure, followed whims, dispensed with destinations and so enjoyed or ignored being lost. There was much to wonder at here, one needed only to be alert and to attend. But they knew one another much as they knew themselves, and their intimacy, rather like too many suitcases, was a matter of perpetual concern; together they moved slowly, clumsily, effecting lugubrious compromises, attending to delicate shifts of mood, repairing breaches. As individuals they did not easily take offence; but together they managed to offend each other in surprising, unexpected ways; then the offender – it had happened twice since their arrival – became irritated by the cloying susceptibilities of the other, and they would continue to explore the twisting alleyways and sudden squares in silence, and with each step the city would recede as they locked tighter into each other's presence.

Mary stood up from her yoga and, after carefully considering her underwear, began to dress. Through the half-open french window she could see Colin on the balcony. Dressed in all white, he sprawled in the aluminium and plastic beach-chair, his wrist dangling near the ground. He inhaled, tilted his head and held his breath, and breathed smoke across the pots of geraniums that lined the balcony wall. She loved him, though not at this particular moment. She put on a silk blouse and a white cotton skirt and, as she sat down on the edge of the bed

to fasten her sandals, picked up a tourist guide from the bedside table. In other parts of the country, according to the photographs, were meadows, mountains, deserted beaches, a path that wound through a forest to a lake. Here, in her only free month of the year, the commitment was to museums and restaurants. At the sound of Colin's chair creaking, she crossed to the dressing-table and began to brush her hair with short, vigorous strokes.

Colin had brought the joint indoors for Mary, and she had refused it – a quick murmur of 'No thanks' – without turning in her seat. He lingered behind her, staring into the mirror with her, trying to catch her eye. But she looked straight ahead at herself and continued to brush her hair. He traced the line of her shoulder with his finger. Sooner or later, the silence would have to break. Colin turned to leave, and changed his mind. He cleared his throat, and rested his hand firmly on her shoulder. Outside there was the beginning of a sunset to watch, and indoors there were negotiations which needed to be opened. His indecision was wholly drug-induced and was of the tail-chasing kind that argued that if he moved away now, having touched her, she might, conceivably at least, be offended . . . but then, she was continuing to brush her hair, long after it was necessary, and it seemed she was waiting for Colin to leave . . . and why? . . . because she sensed his reluctance to stay and was already offended? . . . but was he reluctant? Miserably, he ran his finger along the line of Mary's spine. She now held the handle of the brush in one hand and rested the bristles in the open palm of the other, and continued to stare ahead. Colin leaned forward and kissed her nape, and when she still did not acknowledge him, he crossed the room with a noisy sigh and returned to the balcony.

Colin settled in his chair. Above him was a vast dome of clear sky, and he sighed again, this time in contentment. The workmen on the barges had put away their tools and now stood in a group facing out towards the sunset, smoking cigarettes. On the hotel café pontoon, the clientele had moved on to aperitifs, and the conversations from the tables were muted and steady. Ice chimed in glasses, the heels of the

efficient waiters ticked mechanically across the pontoon boards. Colin stood up and watched the passers-by in the street below. Tourists, many of them elderly, in their best summer suits and dresses, moved along the pavement in reptilian slow motion. Now and then a couple stopped to stare approvingly at the customers on the pontoon drinking against their gigantic backcloth of sunset and reddened water. One elderly gentleman positioned his wife in the foreground and half-knelt with thin, trembling thighs, to take a picture. The drinkers at a table immediately behind the woman raised their glasses good-naturedly towards the camera. But the photographer, intent on spontaneity, straightened and, with a sweeping gesture of his free hand, tried to usher them back on the path of their unselfconscious existence. It was only when the drinkers, all young men, lost interest, that the old man lifted the camera to his face and bent his unsteady legs again. But now his wife had moved a few feet to one side and was interested in something in her hand. She was turning her back to the camera in order to encourage the last rays of sun into her handbag. Her husband called to her sharply and she moved smartly back into position. The closing snap of the handbag clasp brought the young men to life. They arranged themselves in their seats, lifted their glasses once more and made broad, innocent smiles. With a little moan of irritation the old man pulled his wife away by the wrist, while the young men, who barely noticed them leave, re-routed their toasts and smiles towards each other.

Mary appeared at the french window, a cardigan draped around her shoulders. With excited disregard for the state of play between them, Colin immediately set about recounting the little drama in the street below. She stood at the balcony wall, watching the sunset while he spoke. She did not shift her gaze when he gestured towards the young men at their table, but she nodded faintly. Colin could not reproduce the vague misunderstandings that constituted, according to him, the main interest of the story. Instead, he heard himself exaggerate its small pathos into vaudeville, perhaps in an attempt to gain Mary's full attention. He described the elderly gentleman as 'incredibly old and feeble', his wife was

'batty beyond belief', the men at the table were 'bovine morons', and he made the husband give out 'an incredible roar of fury'. In fact the word 'incredible' suggested itself to him at every turn, perhaps because he feared that Mary did not believe him, or because he did not believe himself. When he finished, Mary made a short 'mm' sound through a half smile.

They stood several feet apart and continued to stare across the water in silence. The large church across the broad channel which they had often talked of visiting was now a silhouette and, nearer, a man in a small boat returned his binoculars to their case and knelt to restart the outboard motor. Above them and to their left, the green neon hotel-sign came on with an abrupt, aggressive crackle which subsided into a low buzz. Mary reminded Colin that it was getting late, that they should be going soon before the restaurants closed. Colin agreed, but neither moved. Then Colin sat down in one of the beach-chairs, and not long after that Mary sat down too. Another short silence, and they reached for one another's hand. Little squeeze answered little squeeze. They moved their chairs closer and whispered apologies. Colin touched Mary's breasts, she turned and kissed first his lips and then, in a tender, motherly way, his nose. They whispered and kissed, stood up to embrace, and returned to the bedroom where they undressed in semi-darkness.

This was no longer a great passion. Its pleasures were in its unhurried friendliness, the familiarity of its rituals and procedures, the secure, precision-fit of limbs and bodies, comfortable, like a cast returned to its mould. They were generous and leisurely, making no great demands, and very little noise. Their lovemaking had no clear beginning or end and frequently concluded in, or was interrupted by, sleep. They would have denied indignantly that they were bored. They often said they found it difficult to remember that the other was a separate person. When they looked at each other they looked into a misted mirror. When they talked of the politics of sex, which they did sometimes, they did not talk of themselves. It was precisely this collusion that made them

vulnerable and sensitive to each other, easily hurt by the rediscovery that their needs and interests were distinct. They conducted their arguments in silence, and reconciliations such as this were their moments of greatest intensity, for which they were deeply grateful.

They dozed, then dressed hurriedly. While Colin went to the bathroom, Mary returned to the balcony to wait. The hotel sign had been turned off. The street below was deserted, and on the pontoon two waiters were clearing away the cups and glasses. The few customers who remained were no longer drinking. Colin and Mary had never left the hotel so late, and Mary was to attribute much of what followed to this fact. She paced the balcony impatiently, inhaling the musty smell of geraniums. There were no restaurants open now, but on the far side of the city, if they could find it, was a late-night bar outside which a man sometimes stood with his hot-dog stand. When she was thirteen, still a conscientious, punctual schoolgirl alive with a hundred ideas for self-improvement, she had kept a notebook in which, every Sunday evening, she set out her goals for the week ahead. These were modest, achievable tasks, and it comforted her to tick them off as the week progressed: to practise the cello, to be kinder to her mother, to walk to school to save the bus fare. She longed for such comfort now, for time and events to be at least partially subject to control. She sleepwalked from moment to moment, and whole months slipped by without memory, without bearing the faintest imprint of her conscious will.

'Ready?' Colin called. She went inside, closing the french window behind her. She took the key from the bedside table, locked the door, and followed Colin down the unlit staircase.

THROUGHOUT THE CITY, at the confluences of major streets, or in the corners of the busiest square, were small, neatly constructed kiosks or shacks which by day were draped with newspapers and magazines in many languages, and with tiers of postcards showing famous views, children, animals and women who smiled when the card was tilted.

Inside the kiosk sat the vendor, barely visible through the tiny hatch, and in virtual darkness. It was possible to buy cigarettes here and not know whether it was a man or a woman who sold them. The customer saw only the native deep brown eyes, a pale hand, and heard muttered thanks. The kiosks were centres of neighbourhood intrigue and gossip; messages and parcels were left here. But tourists asking for directions were answered with a diffident gesture towards the display of maps, easily missed between the ranks of lurid magazine covers.

A variety of maps was on sale. The least significant were produced by commercial interests and, besides showing the more obvious tourist attractions, they gave great prominence to certain shops or restaurants. These maps were marked with the principal streets only. Another map was in the form of a badly printed booklet and it was easy, Mary and Colin had found, to get lost as they walked from one page to another. Yet another was the expensive, officially sanctioned map which showed the whole city and named even the narrowest of passageways. Unfolded, it measured four feet by three and, printed on the flimsiest of papers, was impossible to manage outdoors without a suitable table and special clips. Finally there was a series of maps, noticeable by their blue-



and-white striped covers, which divided the city into five manageable sections, none of them, unfortunately, overlapping. The hotel was in the top quarter of map two, an expensive, inefficient restaurant at the foot of map three. The bar towards which they were now walking was in the centre of map four, and it was only when they passed a kiosk, shuttered and battened for the night, that Colin remembered that they should have brought the maps. Without them they were certain to get lost.

However, he said nothing. Mary was several feet ahead, walking slowly and evenly as though measuring out a distance. Her arms were folded and her head was lowered, defiantly contemplative. The narrow passageway had brought them on to a large, flatly lit square, a plain of cobbles, in the centre of which stood a war memorial of massive, rough-hewn granite blocks assembled to form a gigantic cube, topped by a soldier casting away his rifle. This was familiar, this was the starting point for nearly all their expeditions. But for a man stacking chairs outside a café, watched by a dog and, further off, another man, the square was deserted.

They crossed diagonally and entered a wider street of shops selling televisions, dishwashers and furniture. Each store prominently displayed its burglar-alarm system. It was the total absence of traffic in the city that allowed visitors the freedom to become so easily lost. They crossed streets without looking and, on impulse, plunged down narrower ones because they curved tantalizingly into darkness, or because they were drawn by the smell of frying fish. There were no signs. Without a specific destination, the visitors chose routes as they might choose a colour, and even the precise manner in which they became lost expressed their cumulative choices, their will. And when there were two together making choices? Colin stared at Mary's back. The street lighting had bleached her blouse of colour, and against the old blackened walls she shimmered, silver and sepia, like an apparition. Her fine shoulder-blades, rising and falling with her slow stride, made a rippling fan of creases across her silk blouse, and her hair, which was partly gathered at the