

## The Pressure of Time

by Thcmc:s M. Disch

They were learning all about history, the holy martyrs and Rome burning down and if you didn't burn incense for Jupiter you had to go into the Colosseum while the pagans watched. Jupiter is a false god, but we believe in one god the Father Almighty. There was a little girl in the picture too, with a white dress for purity and white flowers in her hair, and Sister Augustine said the holy martyrs should be an inspiring example for every boy and girl.

They had waited all day, because the smallest children went last, but at last the Public Health man came and talked to Sister. He had a white dress with gold buttons, and his hair was gold, too, like tiny gold wires, because he was English. So they put on their sweaters and went outside to wait in line beside the medical unit in the wet gravel with puddles everywhere. Emma was the monitor. She stood at the end of the line in her red sweater and her little red polly boots, fingering the pink health card with her name on it. Her first name began with ,E and her second name began with an R, but she was slow in Reading—all the little letters looked the same. But if you don't learn to read, you won't know what the signs say on top of stores, you won't know what street you're on if you ever go to Dublin, and you can't make a shopping list.

She went in the door and the man with the gold beard took her card and jiggled it in his machine, and then Mary Ellen Poorlick screamed like a banshee. The man who stuck the needles in tried to talk to her, but with his funny accent you couldn't understand a word. Jamie Baro was next, then Emma, and she couldn't look away from the needle, as long as her own middle finger. If she had

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to be a holy martyr, she knew she'd have run away when the lions came out of their cages instead of singing along with the others, but the door was closed behind her now, and the man said, "Try and relax now, Emma." He was a tarry, because fairies have gold hair like that, and in any ease all the English are bent as a pin. That's what Leonard said. He put something cold on her arm, while the needle filled up with more white stuff, and she clenched herself tight all over, and he stuck it right into her arm.

She knew the very next thing after that that she must have done something wrong then, because she was in the Principal's office, and Sister Mary Margaret was putting water on her face, but worse than that her Cousin Bridie was there with one of the babies. Bridie was saying, "Oh, tension! Her mother is another great one for tensions."

she tried to sit up in the day-nap cot, but sister Mary Margaret pushed her flat again. "You'd better rest a minute, my dear. You're not well."

Emma touched her arm where it hurt. There was a band-aid on it.

Cousin Bridie said, "We're taking up your time, Sister," and Sister Mary Margaret said, "Nonsense," and handed Emma a cone of water to drink.

"Suy thank you," said Cousin Bridie. Emma said thank you.

"You see, it's all over now, and there wasn't anything to fuss about, was there? The pain is always in the waiting, not in the thing we've waited for."

cousin Bridie sighed and rocked the baby. Her lips were unhappy, the way they got when she was cooking dinner, but when she listened to music her face was pretty, or when there was a funny show on

the telly, and when she was like that you could talk to her and she was nicer than almost any other glowr1-up. But not when her lips were like that.

so she rested and then sister M'ry Margaret said, "Emma, your cousin is here to take you home with her

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for a little while. You have to promise to be very good. Sister Augustine tells me you're one of her best-behaved children,"

Emma looked down at the band-aid. "Did I do something then?"

"What do you mean, Emma?"

"Something wrong—out there?"

"Oh, this is nothing to do with the polio shot. We can't help things like that. It's because your grandfather—or rather your great-grandfather, I believe?"

"Yes," said Cousin Bridie.

"Your great-grandfather has finally passed. or, as we all must, and you're to stay with your cousin during the wake. Only three or four days. We'll all have to say prayers for him to help him out of purgatory, though I'm sure he won't need many. He was a very good man."

"He was a patriot," Cousin Bridie said. She began to cry.

"Comfort yourself, Mrs. Anckers. I'm sure death came as a blessing. [He was an old man and he suffered great pain. Pray to Our Lady. Think of the sorrow that must have been hers. We must all expect to lose our fathers and mothers, but *she* lost a child, her only child, so that He might pay the price for our sins,"

Cousin Bridie stopped crying.

"Now, if Emma is feeling well enough, I must be getting back to my class. Your family is in my prayers." She touched a finger to Emma's forehead, close to the hurt, and smiled and left.

Bridie put the baby in the pram that was standing in a puddle outside the door. The wheels made snaky tracks on the dirty pavement. You could hear a classroom, inside, singing "Old Black Joe". Emma loved Music best, taking after her father in that. Her father was dead.

Cousin Bridie took her hand crossing the street, though she didn't need to. Emma was six going on seven and walked home every day by herself or sometimes with the Kramer boy.

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She asked, "How old is Granny?"

"Ninety-six."

"Is that old to die?"

"You might say so. In Ireland."

"But not in England?"

"Who's been talking to you about England?"

"I.[obody."

n>Your motherP"

"sister Augustine says you don't have to die in England, because they're all heretics there."

"I'll bet your mother *has* been saying things to you." Cousin Bridie made one of her faces. She didn't get on with Emma's mother. The Anckers were poor and lived on O'Connell Street, while Emma and her mother lived with their grandfather above the ffowershop, *Tauler's Ageless F/orDers*. Mr. Tauler was a Jew, and handled the commnercial end. Emma's grandfather made the flowers, but he was too fat to look after the shop, so Emma's mother did that now, and Emma washed the ffowers with Fairy Liquid, first a capital *F*, then a capital *L*.

The Anckers lived in two rooms in the basement with the three babies, F'larence, Christopher, and Angela. Cne whole wall was covered with the books, old books from before the Plague some of them. They were Leonard's books. Leonard was Cousin Bridie's tragedy. He had a degree from Trinity College and he was supposed to make houses except he didn't, so when you visited them you had to eat Public Health food from Llnesco, and right before every meal Cousin Bridie would se/, "f hope you don't mind the way we eat." It was better food most of the time than the food from stores.

After the babies' formula Cousin Bridie sat down by the telly, *Sunset Serenades*. Leonard was out at a Conservative meetitlg, and Emma, being careful, took out one of the tall books. A woman was laying down on a bed without any clothes and there was a fat nigger-woman behind her carrying flowers. Then there was a boy dressed ,rp like an Irish National Security Agent and

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playing a flute. Then just some flowers. Then a sort of mess with a boat in it. Then the woman who looked so much like Emma's mother that they all agreed it was a miracle. She had a parrot too.

Leonard came home drunk and said he damn well did think it was a cause for celebration, and Cousin Bridie said he was disgusting and there are some things you shouldnt say.

And then Leonard said, "Well I say fuck him and fqv him, the old bastard."

You should never say fuck.

And Cousin Bridie said, "Little pitchers."

And Leonard said, "Jesus Christ, why didn't you tell me we had company!"

Then they had dinner. Dinner was soup r,vith cabbage and bones, then some fried protein and veg, then a nice fortified pudding, though Leonard took most of it on his own plate. Cousin Bridie said, "I hope you don't mind the way we eat" four different times.

After dinner you always have to watch the telly, first *Newsfl,ash*, which never made much sense except about superstars, then *Looking Back*, about the First Famine a hundred years ogo, and that was fun but it only lasted ten minutes, and then *This Emerald rsle*, Tonight it was only a panel discussion of teenagers about kissing. A month ago Sean Kramer had kissed her and she'd shown him her bottom and he showed her his bottom with the peewee on it. It was a secret. The discussion was moderated by the Right Reverend C. S. Marchesini, S. J., who was very much in the public eye lately and talked about. Sometimes kissing was a sin and sometimes it wasn't, and the best policy was to ask your confessor.

It was eight o'clock when Emma's mother came by; she was late. Cousin Bridie said, "Mury, you look

just beautiful! Leonard, doesn't she look beautifulP

Leonard said, "Yes."

Her mother said, "r drgg it out of Ellen's trunk. It was the only thing I could find."

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Cousin Bridie said, \*It's iust beautiful."

And it was, Emrna thought, very beautiful. Her rmother was always beautiful, more than anyone else she'd ever seen.

It was going to be a lovely funeral. People would be coming from Dublin to be there. The Council had voted a monument. Leonard had to laugh about that. He showed them the drawing *he'd* made, using the true and only limestone of Kilkenny that God put there. Leonard didn't believe in the new materials. Her mother said after all you can't tell the difference. Leonard said *lze* could tell the differerlce. Her mother said she supposed a man in his line of work would have to, but it came to the question of money, didn't itP Cousin Bridie said she thought there were times when it wasn't a question of money. Some things are sacred. Her mother said, "Well, well, I suppose Bridie is right." Cousin Bridie made one of her faces.

They went for a walk, Emma and her mother, down O'Connell Street and up Cathedral Street and along the iron bars that fenced St. Stephen's Cathedral where Leonard. wouldn't Bo, instead he went to Immaculate Con\* ception on the other side of town, even on Christmas and Easter, and then in by the broken gate. Her mother explained about the wake and all the visitors and having to stay with the Anckers, because they were their only relatives now. You couldn't count the Almrahs or the Smiths. But it wouldn't be for long.

"r{nd then . . .,"

\*And then we'll go awayP"

Her mother laughed the way she did when they were all living together and she lifted Emma up and hugged her into the chilly silk of Ellen's dress. Ellen died, and then Emma's father in the fight, and now Granny. They were Catholics and Catholics have to die. Someday Bmma's mother would die, and someday Emma would die, too, and it can be a beautiful experience if you are in a state of grace.

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\*Yes, we'll go away. We *w,ill* go away. But you mustn't tatr about it, darling. Not even now. And if your Cousin Bridie tries to talk to you about England, oi about me, you must say that you dont know anything about what Im going to do with my share of the money. It's our secret. Do you promiseP"

'Yes. But will you tell me about London?"

"London—oh, London is going to be wonderful, Emma. when you see it the first time you'll think you're in a dream. London is the most beautiful city in the world.. Dublin is just a dustheap by compariion." She gave Emma one more squeeze and lowered her. The grass where they walked was so long that it tickled her legs over the tops of her boots and rnade them wet.

"There'll be music in the streets and sunlight all night long, or as good as sunlight. The buildings are all fresh and new, not scabby and full of mice, and there is a park there as big as all Clonmel that's filled with flowers, -real flowers growing in dirt. And there are towers so high that on a cloudy d\*y you can't see to the top, because t[e clouds get in the way. And the people will be different there. So much happier. The

people are beautiful; they're young. h[one is resentful or afraid. No one is poor. In London you can live your own life for its own ,ok.. you don't have to lie to yourself or to anyone else. You can't understand what a difference it *uitt* make—to be beautiful ... to be free."

"Will we have to be pagans, too, if we go there, and never dieP"

Her mother stopped and squatted so her face was on a level with Emma's. She smiled with her mouth open, and her hair was blowing across her eyes. She looked beautiful.

"Darling\_! darling!" And she laughed. "ft's not as simple as that. *Theg* can't help it that they don't die, and we can't help it that we do.'

"Why?"

\*If I could answer that questior, Emma"—she brushed,

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her hair back, dark brown like Ernms, and stood up— "then Ireland would cease to exist."

They walked back to the gate on the path. A priest was standing by the second Station of the Cross, saying a rosary, swaying.

"Good evening, N4rs. Rosetti. So the end has come at last. He was a good man. The r,world will seem a little smaller no'w."

"Yes, a tragedy," Mrs. Rosetti murnbled, hurrying out the gate.

"Good. evening, Emma," the priest called out,

"Good evening, Father."

She watched him flickering through the bars and holly prickles, as her mother hurried her along on the walk. How did he know her name was Emma? She'd never seen him before in her life.

His name was the Right Reverend C. S. Marchesini, S. f., from Dublin, and he gave the ftneral serrnon, Death, where is thy victory? St. Stephen's was ftled almost like Sunday with just a few pews at the back empty. Emma sat between her mother and Mr. Tauler, the Jew who handled the commercial end, right at the front. St. Augustine said you shouldn't call them Jews if they were baptized, but everyone did anyhow.

Emma had a black dress too today, but the hem was only tacked because the babies were teething all night and Cousin Bridie got drunk. When her mother came in the car, there was a quarrel. Leonard said he'd be damned if he'd set his foot in that travesty, and her mother said it would come as no surprise to anyone if he was. Cousin Bridie started crying and kept it up all the way to the church.

Just before the last hyrtttt everyone had to go look inside the coffin. Her mother lifted her up. FHe was wearing lipstick and smiling, and she thought he looked nice, because usually he didn't smile. He wasn't as fat either, and he didn't have his cane. Unless he was laying on top of it. He used to grab her with his cane, when she wasn't

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careful, slipping the crook around her neek. Her mother said that when she was a little girl he did the

same thing to her. It was the sort of thing you had to put up with. Emma kissed him on the cheek. It was hard, like a doll's.

They rode in a car to the Rock, twenty miles, and when they got there the wind was incredible and the wreath almost blew off. There were fewer people out here, fuel being what it was. The Right Reverend C. S. Marchesini, S. J. The city fathers and the Archbishop. And of course all the relatives—Emma and her mother, Cousin Bridie with Florence, her oldest, and the Almraths from Dublin and the Smiths from Cork. Old Mrs. Almrath was Emma's great-aunt and sent her a holy card every Christmas that was blessed by the Pope. She had two, a Virgin and a Sacred Heart blessed by innocent, and one, St. Peter, blessed by Leo. Sorned&y, Mrs. Almrath said, she would get Emma an audience with Pope Leo.

They put the coffin with Granny in it in the hole and covered it up with dirt. Mr. Smith said, "He was a great man, a great man. They don't come in that size anymore." Her mother was holding Cousin Bridie around her waist, and Cousin Bridie was crying. The Anckers weren't getting any of the money, and that's what the fight had really been about. Bridie said she didn't care, but Leonard said *he* cared. He hadn't put up with the old bastard's shit all these years to have his nose rubbed in it now. Her mother said Leonard couldn't lose a game of draughts with any grace and everyone knew it. She was sorry for Bridie and the babies, but Bridie had made her mistake four years ago, and she'd said so at the time.

The last thing they did, they all gathered around the monument to admire it and to find a nice place to put their weather-sealed floral tributes. The monument was six feet tall and rather fat and there were hundreds of capital letters all over it.

It was dark and Emma was the ghost. She didn't know if she should run when she was bleeding, but she ran. Down the row of cattleyas, shimmering behind their cur-

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tain of air: no one. She glanced up at the holly, where the decorative soldiery of ancient Rome celebrated their eternal triumph. Of course they couldn't be hiding *there*. It was an illusion, something to do with light waves, she couldn't remember. She made a scary noise—Who! No one answered. Maybe they were all home safe. She went back, stood within the shadow of the vent, alone. Below and above Hampstead and the sky arranged themselves in geometries of white light. Each little star was a sun, far away, burning. She had seen them depart in cars like sea-shells, though she had not understood then where they were bound. Tau Ceti. AU the stars have foreign names, and the planets are Roman gods. Her own name was foreign. So many languages, you'd never learn all of them.

Up the ramp then to the very top, past pots of planted palms, gray in the lamplight. Within the arcade there were no lights. She went *Who*, barely a whisper this time. Girls have more to be afraid of than boys, at night. The thin columns of seeming stone slanted up to the terminating darkness of the vault. Inside her weatherproof her clothes were damp with sweat. The newer ones had pores, like skin, but wouldn't that let the heat out too? The real solution was to live somewhere that was warm in the winter. Malaga. Hollywood. Carthage. Basking in the sun. Swimming in warm saltwater, though not if it was your period of course. Sharks can smell blood.

Unhealthy daydreams. Even if they weren't sinful, it was a bad habit to get into.

Four stars formed a rectangle within the arch's parabolic slice of sky: God's Door, her mother had said.

God closing his door

in the sky,

d all trace of its outline disappears.

It was a famous poem before it was a song. Her voice squeaked nervously in the high arbors of the ziggurat, but

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the voice *she* heard, interiorly, was not her own but St. Theresa's.

Ecstasy—Emma wondered if she had any talent for that sort of thing. Though probably it was a sin, probably.

She wiggled her right hand into the polly weatherproof and touched the larger breast. It had stopped hurting, but the left one was still painful, though not awfully. Another month, her mother had said, but it was already past that time.

she was too old, really, for games like this. Boring and juvenile. Daphne was only ten. She needed a friend more her own age, but there weren't any in this part of Hampstead. Even though they were so much better off, she wished sometimes they were back on Lant Street.

Two grown-ups were making love in one of the caves. She walked past them quickly, embarrassed. The man called out her name,

It was Walt, and her mother was with him. She said, "Hello, Walt. How are you?" It had been a year or more since she'd seen him.

Her mother said, "we're both fine, sweetheart. Did you come up here looking for me?"

"No. I'm the ghost."

Just haunting us, eh?" Walt said.

"It's a game they play," her mother said. "What time is it?"

Emma looked at the watch on her bracelet. "Seven-thirty."

Walt had sat up, but her mother was still laying in the mossy stuff. She sounded high. "It's King Arthur in-

King Arthur was her name for Mr. Schiel, their benefactor.

"I don't think so," Emma said. "I don't know."

"Come and sit down with us a minute, Rose-Red." Walt patted the moss. His hair was changed from the way she remembered it, and his face was darker. He was a cook for Wimpy's and remarkably handsome.

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"I can't. I have to look for the other kids. They're hiding."

"Emma?" Her mother rose to her knees in slow motion. Her mouth drooped open, like St. Theresa's. Emma had practiced the same expression when she was alone, but it didn't work for her. Her lower lip was too thin.

"Yes, Mother." She assumed a tone of tolerance.

"It would be better if you didn't say anything to father about. . ."

"No, Mother, of course not,"

'And if he asks—'

"I'll just say I've been playing on the roof since school and I don't know where you are."

"Irrtreither do f, sweetheart. Neither do f." She chuckled, and Walt took hold of her hand. "I'm somewhere out in space, fitting all the links together."

"What?" Emma asked, though she knew better than to try and make sense of what her mother said at such times.

"The links—the links between the stars, the links of my armor, the links of the endless chain."

Emma nodded unhappily and backed off down the arcade. When she reached the ramp, she began running. Daphne, Ralph, and Ralph's little sister were all standing in the shadow of the vent, safe.

"Where are you going?" Daphne called to her.

She pressed the red button for the lift. She didn't know what to say. Her mother was supposed to have stopped taking that sort of thing. Arthur had spent all sorts of money to help her. "Home," she said, just as the lift opened its doors. She fed her house-tag into the slot.

The lift said, "Good evening, Miss Rosetti. I hope you've enjoyed yourself." But if you said anything back, it didn't understand. Arthur Schiel worked for a company and was rich, so they lived in a luxury building, but even though he'd been very good to Emma and her mother, he was a stupid snob and nobody really liked him.

Emma felt just sick.

He was waiting in the wool chair that had cost so much,

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undressed. The Volkswagen was parked by the sink, filled with water for his bath. Except for the splash of the water, the room was quiet. Arthur didn't like music.

"Where is your mother, Emma?" he asked.

"How should I know?" she said. She knew she should try to be nice to him, but it was so hard.

While she tucked her weatherproof away, he watched her with a sarcastic smile. She went to the back end of the telly, where he couldn't see her, and used the earphones while the flickering images smoothed her distress, like a hand that gently closed the lids of her eyes.

Arthur Schiel, sitting in the costly discomfort of the woolen chair, listened to the running water and stared at Emma's tapping feet with helpless, unassuageable rage.

That was the night they were thrown out and had to go to Lant street to Live, once again, with Walt.

The screen, an American-made holly, represented an interior of the Katsura Palace with a view onto a spring garden roseate with blossoms of apricot. Three feet by six (to match the tatami that they had always intended to buy), it rented from DER at €5 a month,



When slid aside, the screen discovered a nest of three desks and, above and below, a utility honeycomb housing a defunct dictionary, a wonky tape machiro, and an Olivetti with a fuayed, faint ribbon but still functioning, except for the tab. The remainirrg cells of this hive were given over now to Emma's collection of pebbles from the beaches of Brighton and Hastings: ffint, shingle, sandstone, red and gray quartzite, shale, and chert.

Emmy—the Baby Bear of the household—had the smallest of the three desks. Her desk had its own drawer, which she always locked, keeping the k\*y on her bracelet. Inside the drawer there were a diary for the year eoBB (never comptreted), a plastic datr, a small bottle of Lourdes water (a departing present from Sister NIury Margaret), a string of unmatched pearls salvaged from

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one of her mother's tirades, and an antique Suchard chocolate box. Inside the chocolate box, in a white enveloPe, were three photos, each turo and a half by four inches.

The first ihowed three men and a cow standing before a large ochrous house. The shutters and the long wooden balcony railing above the first floor were painted moss-green. The cow, gravid with milk, stood in the foreground, interrupting a futl view of two of the men. The third, Crably dt'tsed, faced away from the camera and seemed to be there, like the cow, for the sake of local color. The men smiling into the camera had somehow the air of tourists. Their faces were tanned with the same cheery gold as the walls of the house. The taller man wore a white uit embroidered with roses and a ruffed shirt; ringlets of red hair blew across his rather weak chin. The other man, bare-chested, in shorts, held a bottle of win€ up, toasting the photoglapher. On the back of the picture, in purple ink, was written: "Reutte, IttlY '52,"

The second photo\$aph showed the head and shoulders of a man resembling the taller of the two men in the first photograph, though now his hair was brown and his chin was strengthened by a van Dyke. He had put on some weight as well. His cheeks and lower lip seemed uncom\*otly red, his expression slack. Perhaps he had been drinking. His eyelids drooped, Buddha-like, over bright turquoise eyes that focused on the camera with an intensity out of keeping with his other features. Behind him an orange tree exhibited leaves and three small oranges, This photo was unlabeled.

The third bore an inscription across the cloud-haze in the upper third of the picture: "Walt and Me—Summer Holyduy." The same man was once again redheaded. Itris beaid was fuller, his ftace and body more lean. Except for a silver bracelet and a thick silver chain about his neck, he was naked, &s was the little girl he held in the air. The skin of his torso, arms, and legs, shaved for competition and shining with oil, was perfectly smooth. His hands supported the grrl's pelvic girdle, and she maintained a pre-184

carious balance by restitg her forehead against his. Th"y grinned, staring into each other's eyes. In the middle ddtance, part of the promiscuous mass of bathers, Emma's mother could be discerned resting in a beach chair, modestly bikinied, her eyes averted from the playful pair in the foreground to regard the gray-green sea.

Often when she found herself alone in their two-room flat, Emma would slide away the screen, unlock the drawer, and take out the suchard box. when she had finished looking at the photographs, she would kiss each in turn, lips pressed tightly together, before replacitg them in the envelope. she was in love with walt.

\*Are there," old Mr. Harness ask€d, \*rrry in the class . . . who .,. P" The dty lipr crumbled in an unspoken apology. The quick eyes, yellow as the basins of the school Iav, caught her embarrassed glance and shifted away.

would I have been silent, if he had asked? Emma wondered. Would I have faced the lions?

After all, even if they did find out she was a Catholic, they couldn't do anything worse than tease her a bit, the way they had at the other school.

"Of course," he mumbled, "your account may differ significantly from the what-would-you-say . . . the official account of the Irish Church. It lacks the *nihil obstat*. Events such as these, possessing still some flavor of controversy, resist our efforts to order them by simple schemes."

Charmian Levin, sitting behind Emma, touched a pen-cil tip to a knob of her spine. Emma stiffened and tucked in her blouse.

"History is never simple, of course, until we cease to care too terribly much. One might liken the mechanism of tolerance to the painter's trick of aerial perspective: with distance, we lose the edge and color of things. We gain, perhaps, the vista."

Charmian, who at fifteen was the oldest girl at Farnsworth, swiveled ninety degrees on her stool and, with a

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schooling gesture, fluttered the white banner of her hair. "Oh, August—such blague!"

The yellow eyes lowered to regard the girls' glasslike sandals. The old man wondered, with a small sad spite, what part of his monthly salary they had cost.

"I was rather straying, wasn't I? To return, then, to the Papal Bull of 1520:"

Emma wrote in her notebook: "Papal Bull, 1520,"

"—which was dubbed, almost immediately, the 'Mad Bull,' due to a short-lived effort, within the Roman hierarchy, to call the Pope's sanity into question. But, as the instigators of this plan were themselves immortal survivors of the Plague and, by this new pronouncement, excommunicated, their actions served only to hasten the schism that Luther was seeking to bring about."

Emma wrote in her notebook: "Heretics excommunicated." Charmian's pencil traced a line along her lower rib.

"I think, in retrospect, that John acted in the best interests of his church, even though the immediate effect was an eighty percent reduction in its membership. That figure indicates how much, even then, the new sensibility had found itself at odds with the traditional outlook that the Church represented, for the ratio of mortals to immortals in the general population was then, as now, a mere fraction of one percent. In England and other more advanced nations, the falling-off had been much more drastic than that. In twenty-three, two years before the Mad Bull, the Roman Catholic population of Britain had declined by fifty percent from its level at the turn of the century. And in other churches the decline was even more precipitate."

Emma wrote: "1520, 80%."

"The Church's real strength was in Central and South America, areas where disease and famine still maintained, if artificially, a sense of the mortal and a need to believe in an afterlife. But this could hardly be considered an enduring strength, founded as it was on ignorance and poverty. I think these considerations help to explain

John's ruthlessness. The continued toleration of immortals within the Church could only have vitiated its potential as a what-shall-I-say ... a rallying-point for the mortal element. And in this he was successful, as we know. We may judge it a small success, but possibly it was the only one that could have been wrested from the circumstances."

Emma wrote: "The Church victorious."

Mr. Harness asked: "Are there any questions? Charmian?"

"It still, you know, doesn't seem *fair*. I mean, most of that eighty percent that got booted out still believed all that stuff, didn't they? And then just to be told that it didn't make any *difference*, whether they believed. Could *they* help it they were born immortal?"

"On that point you would have to consult a Jesuit. The Church's position is that they could and can help it. We are all, or rather"—and again, and even more devastatingly, the lips crumbled—"all are all heretics. It's not essentially different from the notion of original sin."

"But, I *mean!* It's genetics."

"Yes—alas," said Mr. Harness,

Emma closed her notebook.

"Emma?"

"Please, I have to go to the lav."

Leaving Mr. Harness's room, Emma stepped squarely on Charmian Levin's splendid foot. She could almost feel, in her own foot, the pain she'd caused.

Once, in her first months at the Inverness School, Charmian had been Emma's best friend, but those days were gone forever. It was fruitless to suppose otherwise. Too much had been said on both sides, and there was no longer a basis for mutual respect.

Nevertheless, she did, bolted in the loo, open Charmian's note and read it, once, before flushing it down. It was an invitation to dinner that night with Charmian's family. Any reply was, of course, unthinkable. Mr. Levin was a business associate of Arthur Schiel, and if Emma's

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mother ever learned .. It was bad enough ( Mrs. Rosetti had often pointed out) that Emma was finishing out the term at Inverness on the tuition provided by Arthur Schiel, but to visit the Levins (*norr*), to have to answer their well-meaning questions, to stand again in Mrs. Levin's proud salor, that perfect little temple of the New ..

There was a knock on the door of the stall. "Emma, it's Charmian. I want to talk to you. Please."

"No."

"I *have* to talk to you. I told old Who-Shall-I-Say it was an urgent matter of feminine hygiene. Did you read my note?"

"X"

{o."

"You did read it. I can tell when you're lying, you know. Emma, I'm sorry for anything I said that might have offended you. I didn't mean it. I've been sick thinking about it, just sick. You *have* to come to dinner tonight."

"Do I?"

"I told my mother you were. She's always asking after you. She said she'd order a special cake from Wimpy's for us. We can be utter pigs about it."

Emma started to cry. It had not been a conscious cruelty on Charmian's part, for Emma had never told her, or anyone else at Inverness, about Walt. Her new address was ignominy enough.

"Is it what I said about God? Is it that? I'm sorry, but I can't *help* what I believe, can I? I'd really like to believe in God, but I can't. I think it's a perfectly respectable idea, though, considered intellectually. I'd probably be happier if I did believe in him, but even then, I couldn't be a Catholic. They wouldn't let me. And I don't care *what* your church says—"

But Emma had never told Charmian she was a Catholic

\*—a person can't help the way he's born. *Will you come to dinner?*"

"It's impossible."

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Just this once. I can't *talk* to anybody anymore. Ellen is so basically stupid. You're younger than I am, but two years doesn't make that much difference. Emma, I need you—just desperately."

It was another ten minutes before Emma was persuaded. On their way to the tubes, Charmian said, "I have some tickets for Westminster Abbey. St. Theresa's going to be there."

"In person?"

Charmian arched a chalk-white brow. "Mm."

"Oh, wonderful!" She caught Charmian about the waist and kissed her cheek, leaving a scarlet smudge.

*'They are no longer passionate'*, Charmian thought with a somewhat grudging approval. She said: "You really *are* my best friend, you know."

Emma caught hold of the older girl's hand and smiled, but she could not bring herself to echo her words. It was not that she would, exactly, have been lying: Charmian was indeed her best—and her only—friend, as Charmian knew quite well. It was just that, even liking someone so awfully, it is unpleasant to be at their mercy.

Once you started burning their incense, they just didn't let you stop.

Noon, the First Friday of May. Along the High Street the shoppers offered to the vivid sun their English limbs, white for sacrifice. Like the very molecules of the air, flesh, warming, seemed to move at a quicker tempo. Mrs. Rosetti passed before the great moneyed pageant of shop-fronts with a mild intoxication, as if of amphetamine, scudding, a cloud. Dawdling, Emma followed.

The pavement divided right and left. Mrs. Rosetti would have preferred the mild self-surrender of the pedestrian belt that arched, at a temperate velocity of five mph, above and across the traffic stream, but Emma was able, with no stronger persuasion than a coaxing glance, to persuade her to take the left fork

into the subway arcade. Fragments of advertising melodies lifted and sank into the ground bass of the ventilation, and at inter-

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vals the murmuring twilight opened into abrupt, bright recessions of holography. The hollies were crude things usually (for it had always been more dowdy, this side Thames)—book-vending machines, a shower of gold celebrating Ascot Day, odorless images of food that boded to be as flavorless in the eating, and everywhere dense crowds of mannikins in polly and paper dresses, and cheap copies of the new African masks. Often the shops proclaimed themselves with nothing more than a painted sign-

*Buy Your*

*Wet Flsh*

*Elere*

or, even more sparely—

*Stuffs*

—an austerity that had been smart a decade before but was now, once again, merely drab.

There was, however, one shop in this arcade that could equal, in a small way, the brilliances of Oxford Street or Piccadilly, and it was this that had lured both mother and daughter down from the daylight world. *The Bride Stripped Bare* was admittedly only an affiliate—one of the smallest—of the great Frisco-based couturier, but here, in Southwark, it was something quite out of the way. Already, this early, a crowd was gathered before the two long windows, and Emma, who was small for her thirteen years, had difficulty worming her way to a vantage point.

The model this week was a Madagascan, shorter even than Emma (a fashion house of any pretension had to employ mortal\*), with the piquant name of Baiba. The model's close-cropped head seemed grotesquely large, though considered as a thing apart it would have been judged a very pretty head indeed, with a ravishing pug nose and, when she grinned, deltas of deep-grained wrinkles about her dark eyes. She could easily have been

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as old as Emma's mother, though, of course, she carried the burden of her years with much more grace. Four attendants, two men and two women, dressed her and undressed her in Stripped Bare swimwear, Stripped Bare evening dresses, and Stripped Bare polties and origami, but the last item—an elaborate ensemble of mourning clothes—Baiba put on without their assistance to a droll, rather honky-tonk version of *Death Shall Have No Dominion*.

"Don't they have lovely things there, Mother?" Emma asked, with what she thought a deceptive generality, as they continued down the arcade.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Rosetti said, not taken in. "And very dear too."

"That little coral do-thingy was only twelve bob."

"That little coral doily would last about two days, if you were careful, and then it would be down the chute with it. Polly obsolesces fast enough."

"But I will need *s'omething*, you know, for the party." Walt would be sixty-seven on the twelfth of M<sup>y</sup>, and Emma was determined to shine for him.

Her mother was just as determined that she wouldn't— not, at least, too brightly. "In any case, Emma, that dress is years too old for you."

"You say that about everything I like."

Mrs. Rosetti smiled vaguely. "Because everything you like is too old. Now *dort*, my darling, bring me down."

Emma, who had learned to read the signs of her mother's weathers, said no more, though she didn't, for all that, give up hope. Friday, when Walt was at work and her mother shopped, was a bad time to dig for favors. The disparity between the real and the ideal, between what the money had to go for and what one would simply *like*, was then too starkly defined.

They came out of the arcade in front of St. George the Martyr, another whitened sepulcher of the C of B, which was nevertheless prettier, Emma had to admit, both inside and out, than St. George's Cathedral, where

she went. Was it only that the Cathedral was made of yellow brick and lacked a proper steeple up front? The same architect, Pugin, had designed the cathedral in Killarney, which was *so* magnificent, but it only seemed stranger, then, that his London cathedral should be so . . . lacking. Emma would have liked, when she grew up, to become an architect, but for mortals that was out of the question. Leonard Ancker was the living proof of that.

"Come along then," her mother said. "It's only A ehr-rreh."

"Only!" she protested, but (Emma was in the state of grace) she obeyed. Almost at once the strength of this obedience was put to a second test. Passing Trinity Street, Emma wanted to turn off to look at the stalls of fresh flowers. Irises were selling at four and six the bunch, narcissi at three shillings. This time her mother would not be swayed.

"We don't have the time," she said. "Or the money."

"Only to look," Emma pleaded.

The fact was that Mrs. Rosetti, perhaps as a result of years tending the shop, didn't appreciate flowers. "Emma!"

"Walt would like them. Walt loves flowers."

"Walt loves many things he can't afford, including us."

Sometimes her mother could be tenibly coarse. Emma obeyed, though with a sense of having somewhat blemished, nonetheless, the immaculate Presence in the sanctuary of her breast.

At Maggy's on the Borough Road they stopped for a snack. Emma had a sixpenny cake from the machine, while her mother went to the counter for jellied eel. Maggy's was famous for its jellied eel. She ate them from the bag, four thick pale cylinders coated with quaking bits of gelatin. Now and again, chewing on one, she would wince, for her molars were getting worse.

Emma made a funny face, "I think those things are disgusting."

"That," her mother said, her mouth still full, 'is half the pleasure of eating them. Would you like a taste?"

"Never"

Her mother shrugged. "Never say never."

Which was, if you looked at it closely, ? pffiadox.

They crossed St. George's Circus on the pedestrian belt. Emma's mother cursed the crowds of idlers and sightseers who rode the belt with no other purpose than to view the Vacancy at the center of the Circus. The Vacancy was a monumental sculptured hole, and Mr. Harness said it was one of the masterpieces of twentieth century art, but Emma, though she had looked at it and looked at it, could see nothing but a big, bumpy, black hole. There simply wasn't anything *there*, though now, because it was spring and people were flower-crazy, the lusterless plastic was strewn with flowers, irises and narcissi and even, here and there, the extravagance of a rose. The flowers were lovely, but the artist—Emma couldn't remember her name—could hardly be given credit for that. While she watched, a bunch of daffs, at two and six a dozen, hurtled from the north-south belt into the sculpture's maw, struck a ledge, and tumbled into the funereal heap in its farthest depth.

The drugstore on Lambeth Road was their last stop. Emma, as her conscience dictated, waited outside, almost within the shadow of St. George's Cathedral. From this simple, unkind juxtaposition, Emma had derived, some time before, her first conscious taste of irony. Her mother had not been to Mass for years. Just as everyone in Clonmel had foretold, Mrs. Rosetti had lost her faith. There was no use talking to her about it, you could only hope and pray.

Her eyes, when she came out, seemed much darker, black rather than brown. Her lower lip had slackened, become kind. She seemed, though in a way that Emma did not like, in some new way, more beautiful.

"Shall we go back now?" Emma asked, looking aside.

"As always," her mother said, with the barest hint, a

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wrinkle at the corner of her mouth, that this might be a joke. She leaned back against the garish mandala that was the trademark of the manufacturer of the shop's chief commodity.

"And did you go to Holy Communion today?" her mother asked.

Emma blushed, though it was certainly nothing to be ashamed of. "Yes. It's First Friday."

"Well, that's good." She closed her eyes.

After a long silence, she said, "The sun is very warm today."

"Yes," said a voice from behind Emma, "it will be summer before we know it."

Emma turned around. The speaker was an old woman in a dress of tattered black origami, an obvious piece of refuse. Sparse hair, dyed to a metallic silver, hung down over a face that was a witch's mask of sharp bones and pouchy skin.

She laid an arthritic hand on Emma's head. "She'll be a beautiful little lady, she will."

Mrs. Rosetti seemed to give this serious consideration before replying. "Probably. Probably she will."

The witch cackled. "You couldn't spare half a crown for an old woman, could you?"

"How old?"

"Old enough to know better." Another spasm of laughter, and the hand clenched, tangling itself in Emma's hair.

For no reason at all (since mortals no less decrepit than this woman were often to be seen in this part of the city) Emma felt terrified.

Mrs. Rosetti took a coin from her pocket and gave it to the old woman. Without a word of thanks, she pushed past Emma to the entrance of the drugstore.

Mrs. Rosetti put a hand on her shoulder. "How old?" she insisted.

It was hard to tell if the woman meant her smile to be

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as nasty as it looked to Emma. "Fifty-four. And how old are *You*, my lovely?"

Mrs. Rosetti closed her eyes tightly. Emma took her hand and tried to pull her away.

The woman followed them along the pavement. "How old?" she shrieked. "How old?"

"Thirty-seven," Mrs. Rosetti said in a whisper.

"It wasn't *you* I meant!" The old woman lifted her head, triumphant in her malice, then returned and entered the shop.

They walked back to Lant Street in silence, following a roundabout path along the least busy streets. Mrs. Rosetti did not notice her daughter's tears.

The bitterness that Emma felt was insupportable, and she could not, at last, stifle the cry of outrage: "How could you? How could you *do* it!"

Mrs. Rosetti regarded Emma with puzzlement, almost with fear. "Do what, Emma?"

"How could you give her that money? It was enough for a dozen daffs. And you just threw it away!"

She slapped Emma's face.

"I hate you!" Emma shouted at her. "And Walt hates you too!"

After the girl had run away, Mrs. Rosetti took another twenty grams. She sat down, not knowing where, not caring, and let the spring sun invade the vast vacancies of her flesh, a beauty that tumbled into her farthest depth.

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