
A person wearing a green coat and brown shoes is holding a large, worn, reddish-brown suitcase. The suitcase has the text "How Shall I Know You?" written on it in a white, cursive font. The person is standing on a wet, paved surface, and the background is blurred.

*How Shall I  
Know You?*

HILARY MANTEL

AUTHOR OF THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE-WINNING BESTSELLERS  
*Wolf Hall* AND *Bring Up the Bodies*



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# **HOW SHALL I KNOW YOU?**

**A STORY**

**HILARY MANTEL**

**A JOHN MACRAE BOOK**

**HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY**

**NEW YORK**

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NONFICTION

*Giving Up the Ghost*

One summer at the fag end of the nineties, I had to go out of London to talk to a literary society, of the sort that must have been old-fashioned when the previous century closed. When the day came, I wondered why I'd agreed to it; but yes is easier than no, and of course when you make a promise you think the time will never arrive: that there will be a nuclear holocaust, or something else diverting. Besides, I had a sentimental yearning for the days of self-improvement; they were founded, these reading clubs, by master drapers and their shopgirl wives; by poetasting engineers, and uxorious physicians with long winter evenings to pass. Who keeps them going these days?

I was leading at the time an itinerant life, struggling with the biography of a subject I'd come to dislike. For two or three years I'd been trapped into a thankless cycle of picking up after myself, gathering in what I'd already gathered, feeding it onto computer disks that periodically erased themselves in the night. And I was forever on the move with my card indexes and my paper clips, and my cheap notebooks with their porous, blotchy pages. It was easy to lose these books, and I left them in black cabs or in the overhead racks of trains, or swept them away with bundles of unread newspapers from the weekends. Sometimes it seemed I'd be forever compelled to retrace my own steps, between Euston Road and the newspaper collections, which in those days were still in Colindale; between the rain-soaked Dublin suburb where my subject had first seen the light and the northern manufacturing town where—ten years after he ceased to be use or ornament—he cut his throat in a bathroom of a railway hotel. “Accident,” the coroner said, but there's a strong suspicion of a cover-up; for a man with a full beard, he must have been shaving very energetically.

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I WAS LOST and drifting that year, I don't deny it. And as my bag was always packed, there was no reason to turn down the literary

society. They would ask me, they said, to give their members a snappy summary of my researches, to refer briefly to my three short early novels, and then answer questions from the floor: after which, they said, there would be a Vote of Thanks. (I found the capitals unsettling.) They would offer a modest fee—they said it—and lodge me for bed and breakfast at Rosemount, which was quietly situated, and of which, they said enticingly, I would find a photograph enclosed.

This photograph came in the secretary's first letter, double-spaced on small blue paper, produced by a typewriter with a jumping *h*. I took Rosemount to the light and looked at it. There was a suspicion of a Tudor gable, a bay window, a Virginia creeper—but the overall impression was of blurring, a running of pigment and a greasiness at the edges, as if Rosemount might be one of those ghost houses that sometimes appear at a bend in the road, only to melt away as the traveler limps up the path.

So I was not surprised when another blue letter came, hiccupping in the same way, to say that Rosemount was closing for refurbishments and they would be obliged to use Eccles House, convenient for the venue and they understood quite reputable. Again, they enclosed a photograph: Eccles House was part of a long white terrace, four stories high, with two surprised attic windows. I was touched that they felt they ought to illustrate the accommodation in this way. I never cared where I stayed as long as it was clean and warm. I had often, of course, stayed in places that were neither. The winter before there had been a guesthouse in a suburb of Leicester, with a smell so repellent that when I woke at dawn I was unable to stay in my room for longer than it took me to dress, and I found myself, long before anyone else was awake, setting my booted feet on the slick wet pavements, tramping mile after mile down rows of semidetached houses of blackening pebbledash, where the dustbins had wheels but the cars were stacked on bricks; where I turned at the end of each street, and crossed, and retrod my tracks, while behind thin curtains East

Midlanders turned and muttered in their sleep, a hundred and a hundred then a hundred couples more.

In Madrid, by contrast, my publishers had put me in a hotel suite that consisted of four small dark paneled rooms. They had sent me an opulent, unwieldy, scented bouquet, great wheels of flowers with woody stems. The concierge brought me heavy vases of a grayish glass, slippery in my hands, and I edged them freighted with blooms onto every polished surface; I stumbled from room to room, coffined against the brown paneling, forlorn, strange, under a pall of pollen, like a person trying to break out from her own funeral. And in Berlin, the desk clerk had handed me a key with the words "I hope your nerves are strong."

THE WEEK BEFORE the engagement, my health was not good. There was a continuous airy shimmer in my field of vision, just to the left of my head, as if an angel were trying to appear. My appetite failed, and my dreams took me to strange waterfronts and ships' bridges, on queasy currents and strange washes of the tide. As a biographer I was more than usually inefficient; in untangling my subject's accursed genealogy I mixed up Aunt Virginie with the one who married the Mexican, and spent a whole hour with a churning stomach, thinking that all my dates were wrong and believing that my whole Chapter Two would have to be reworked. The day before I was due to travel east I simply gave up on the whole enterprise, and lay on my bed with my eyes shut tight. I felt not so much a melancholy, as a kind of general insufficiency. I seemed to be pining for those three short early novels, and their brittle personnel. I felt a wish to be fictionalized.

My journey was uneventful. Mr. Simister, the secretary, met me at the station. How shall I know you? he had said on the telephone. Do you look like the photograph on your book jackets? Authors, I find, seldom do. He giggled after saying this, as if it were edgy wit of a high order. I had considered: a short pause on the line had made him ask, Still there? I am the same, I said. They are not a bad likeness, only I am older now, of course, thinner in the face, my hair



is much shorter and a different color, and I seldom smile in quite that way. I see, he said.

“Mr. Simister,” I asked, “how shall I know you?”

I KNEW HIM by his harassed frown, and the copy of my first novel, *A Spoiler at Noonday*, which he held across his heart. He was buttoned into an overcoat; we were in June, and it had turned wintry. I had expected him to hiccup, like his typewriter.

“I think we shall have a wet one of it,” he said, as he led me to his car. It took me a little time to work my way through this syntactical oddity. Meanwhile he creaked and ratcheted car seats, tossed a soiled evening newspaper onto the dog blanket in the back, and vaguely flapped his hand over the passenger seat as if to remove lint and dog hairs by a magic pass. “Don’t your members go out in the rain?” I said, grasping his meaning at last.

“Never know, never know,” he replied, slamming the door and shutting me in. My head turned back, automatically, the way I had come. As, these days, my head tends to do.

We drove for a mile or so, toward the city center. It was five-thirty, rush hour. My impression was of an arterial road, lined by sick saplings, and lorries and tankers rumbling toward the docks. There was a huge, green roundabout, of which Mr. Simister took the fifth exit, and reassured me, “Not far now.”

“Oh, good,” I said. I had to say something.

“Are you not a good traveler?” Mr. Simister said anxiously.

“I’ve been ill,” I said. “This last week.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He did look sorry; perhaps he thought I would be sick on his dog blanket.

I turned away deliberately and watched the city. On this wide, straight, busy stretch, there were no real shops, just the steel-shuttered windows of small businesses. On their upper floors at smeary windows were pasted Day-Glo banners that said TAXI TAXI

TAXI. It struck me as an area of free enterprise: freelance debt collectors, massage parlors, body shops and money launderers, dealers in seedy accommodation let twice and thrice, bucket shops for flights to Miami or Bangkok, and netted yards where inbred terriers snarl and cars are given a swift respray before finding a happy new owner. "Here we are." Mr. Simister pulled up. "Like me to come in?"

"No need," I said. I looked around me. I was miles from anywhere, traffic snarling by. It was raining now, just as Mr. Simister had said it would. "Half past six?" I asked.

"Six-thirty," he said. "Nice time for a wash and brushup. Oh, by the way, we're renamed now, Book Group. What do you think? Falling rolls, you see, members dead."

"Dead? Are they?"

"Oh yes. Get in the younger end. You're sure you wouldn't like a hand with that bag?"

ECCLES HOUSE WAS not precisely as the photograph had suggested. Set back from the road, it seemed to grow out of a parking lot, a jumble of vehicles double-parked and crowding to the edge of the pavement. It had once been a residence of some dignity, but what I had taken to be stucco was in fact some patent substance newly glued to the front wall: it was grayish-white and crinkled, like a split-open brain, or nougat chewed by a giant.

I stood on the steps and watched Mr. Simister edge into the traffic. The rain fell harder. On the opposite side of the road there was a carpet hangar, with the legend ROOM-SIZED REMNANTS painted on a banner on its façade. A depressed-looking boy zipped into his waterproofs was padlocking it for the night. I looked up and down the road. I wondered what provision they had made for me to eat. Normally, on evenings like this, I would make some excuse—a phone call expected, a nervous stomach—and turn down the offer of "a bit of dinner." I never want to prolong the time I spend with my hosts. I am not, in fact, a nervous woman, and the business of

speaking to a hundred people or so causes me no qualms, but it is the small talk afterward that wears me down, and the twinkling jocularity, the “book-chat” that grates like a creaking hinge.

So I would sneak away; and if I had not been able to persuade the hotel to leave me some sort of supper tray, I would walk out and find a small, dark, half-empty restaurant, at the end of a high street, that would provide a dish of pasta or a fillet of sole, a half-bottle of bad wine, a diesel-oil espresso, a glass of Strega. But tonight? I would have to go along with whatever arrangement they had made for me. Because I could not eat carpets, or “personal services,” or solicit a bone from a drug dealer’s dog.

MY HAIR FLATTENED by the rain, I stepped inside, to a travelers’ stench. I was reminded at once of my visit to Leicester; but this place, Eccles House, was on a stifling scale of its own. I stood and breathed in—because one must breathe—tar of ten thousand cigarettes, fat of ten thousand breakfasts, the leaking metal seep of a thousand shaving cuts, and the horse-chestnut whiff of nocturnal emissions. Each odor, ineradicable for a decade, had burrowed into the limp chintz of the curtains and into the scarlet carpet that ran up the narrow stairs.

At once I felt my guardian angel flash, at the corner of my eye. The weakness he brought with him, the migrainous qualm, ran through my whole body. I put out the palm of my hand and rested it against the papered wall.

There seemed to be no reception desk, nowhere to sign in. Probably no point: who’d stay here, who traveled under their right name? Come to that, I didn’t travel under mine. Sometimes I got confused, what with the divorce disentanglements, and the business bank accounts, and the name under which I’d written my early novels, which happened to be the name of one of my grandmothers. You should be sure, when you start in this business, that there’s one name you can keep: one that you feel entitled to, come what may.

From somewhere—beyond a door, and another door—there was a burst of male laughter. The door swung shut; the laughter ended in a wheeze, which trailed like another odor on the air. Then a hand reached for my bag. I looked down, and saw a small girl—a girl, I mean, in her late teens: a person, diminutive and crooked, banging my bag against her thigh.

She looked up and smiled. She had a face of feral sweetness, its color yellow; her eyes were long and dark, her mouth a taut bow, her nostrils upturned as if she were scenting the wind. Her neck seemed subject to a torsion; the muscles on the right side were contracted, as if some vast punitive hand had picked her up and taken her in a grip. Her body was tiny and twisted, one hip thrust out, one leg lame, one foot trailing. I saw this as she broke away from me, lugging my bag toward the stairs.

“Let me do that.” I carry, you see, not just the notes of whatever chapter I am working on, but also my diary, and those past diaries, kept in A4 spiral notebooks, that I don’t want my current partner to read while I’m away: I think carefully about what would happen if I were to die on a journey, leaving behind me a desk stacked with ragged prose and unpunctuated research notes. My bag is therefore small but leaden, and I rushed to catch up with her, wanting to drag it from her poor hand, only to realize that the scarlet stinking stairs shot steeply upward, their risers deep enough to trip the unwary, and took a sharp twist that brought us to the first landing. “Up to the top,” she said. She turned to smile over her shoulder. Her face swiveled to a hideous angle, almost to where the back of her head had been. With a fast, crabwise scuttle, leaning on the side of her built-up shoe, she shot away toward the second floor.

She had lost me, left me behind. By that second landing, I was not in the race. As I began to climb to the third floor—the stairs now were like a ladder, and the smell was more enclosed, and had clotted in my lungs—I felt again the flash of the angel. I was short of breath, and this made me stop. “Only a few more,” she called down. I stumbled up after her.

On a dark landing, she opened one door. The room was a sliver: not even a garret, but a bit of corridor blocked off. There was a sash window that rattled, and a spiritless divan with a brown cover, and a small brown chair with a plush buttoned back, which—I saw at once—had a gray rime of dust, like navel fluff, accumulated behind each of its buttons. I felt sick, from this thought, and the climb. She turned to me, her head wobbling, her expression dubious. In the corner was a plastic tray, with a small electric kettle of yellowed plastic; yellowed wheat ears decorated it. There was a cup.

“All this is free,” she said. “It is complimentary. It is included.”

I smiled. At the same time, inclined my head, modestly, as if someone were threading an honor around my neck.

“It is in the price. You can make tea. Look.” She held up a sachet of powder. “Or coffee.”

My bag was still in her hand; and looking down, I saw that her hands were large and knuckly, and covered, like a man’s, with small unregarded cuts.

“She doesn’t like it,” she whispered. Her head fell forward onto her chest.

It was not resignation; it was a signal of intent. She was out of the room, she was hurtling toward the stair head, she was swarming down before I could draw breath.

My voice trailed after her. “Oh, please ... really, don’t ...”

She plunged ahead, and around the bend in the stairs. I followed, I reached out, but she lurched away from me. I took a big ragged breath. I didn’t want to go down, you see, if I might have to come up again. In those days I didn’t know there was something wrong with my heart. I only found it out this year.

WE WERE BACK on the ground floor. The child produced from a pocket a big bunch of keys. Again, that bilious laughter washed out, from some unseen source. The door she opened was too near this laughter, far too near for my equanimity. The room itself was

identical, except that a kitchen smell was in it, deceptively sweet, as if there were a corpse in the wardrobe. She put down my bag on the threshold.

I felt I had come a long way that day, since I had crept out of my double bed, the other side occupied by a light sleeper who still seemed, sometimes, a stranger to me. I had crossed London, I had traveled east, I had been up the stairs and down. I felt myself too proximate, now, to the gusty, beery laughter of unknown men. "I'd rather ..." I said. I wanted to ask her to try for an intermediate floor. Perhaps not all the rooms were empty, though? It was the other occupants I didn't like, the thought of them, and I realized that here on the ground floor I was close to the bar, to the slamming outer door letting in the rain and the twilight, to the snarled-up traffic ... She picked up my bag. "No ..." I said. "Please. Please don't. Let me ..."

But she was off again, swaying at speed toward the stairs, dragging her leg after her, like an old rebuff. I heard her draw breath above me. She said, as if just to herself, "She thought it was worse."

I caught up with her inside the first choice of room. She leaned against the door. She showed no sign of discomfort, except that one eyelid jerked in spasm; the corner of her lip lifted in time with it, pulling away from her teeth. "I'll be all right here," I said. My ribs were heaving with effort. "Let's not do any more rooms."

I felt a sudden wash of nausea. The migraine angel leaned hard on my shoulder and belched into my face. I wanted to sit down on the bed. But courtesy demanded something. The child had put down my bag, and without it she looked even more unbalanced, her vast hands hanging, her foot scuffling the floor. What should I do? Ask her to stay for a cup of tea? I wanted to offer her money but I couldn't think what would be enough for such a feat of portage, and besides I thought that I might be further in debt to her before I left the place, and perhaps it was best to run up a tab.

I FELT SAD, as I stood in the doorway, waiting for Mr. Simister. My nose ran a little. When Mr. Simister arrived I said, “I have hay fever.”

“We are actually close,” he said; then, after a long pause: “To the venue.” We could walk, he was saying. I shrank back into the doorway. “Perhaps in view of your ailments,” he said. I shrank inside: how did he know my ailments? “Though, a night like this,” he said. “Damps the pollen down. I’d have thought. Somewhat.”

The lecture was to be given at what I can only describe as a disused school. There were school corridors, and those polished shields on the wall that say things like “JK Rowling, Cantab 1963.” There was a smell of school, residual—polish and feet. But there were no signs of actual, present-day pupils. Perhaps they had all fled into the hills, and left it to the Book Group.

Despite the rain, the members had come out in heroic numbers: twenty, at least. They were widely dispersed through the long rows, with tactful gaps between: in case the dead ones rolled in late. Some few had squints and others sticks, many had beards including the women, and the younger members—even those who appeared sound at first glance—had a glazed unfocused eye, and bulging parcels under their seats, which I knew at once would be the manuscripts of sci-fantasy novels, which they would like me to take away and read and comment on and post back to them—“In your own time, of course.”

There is a way of looking, and then there is a professional, impersonal, way of looking. I settled myself behind a table, took a sip of water, flicked through my notes, checked the location of my handkerchief, raised my head, scanned the room, attempted a theoretical sort of eye contact, and swept a smile from side to side of the audience: looking, I am sure, like one of those nodding dogs you used to see in the back of Austin Maestros. Mr. Simister got to his feet; to say “he stood up” would give you no notion of the impressive performance it really was. “Our guest has not been well

in the last week, you will be as sorry as I am to learn, hay fever, so will deliver her lecture sitting down.”

I felt a fool already, a greater fool than I needed to feel. Nobody would sit down because they had hay fever. But I thought, never explain. I rattled smartly through my performance, throwing in the odd joke and working in one or two entirely spurious local allusions. Afterward there were the usual questions. Where did the title of your first book come from? What happened to Joy at the end of *Teatime in Bedlam*? What, would I say, looking back, were my own formative influences? (I replied with my usual list of obscure, indeed nonexistent Russians.) A man in the front row spoke up: “May I ask what prompted your foray into biography, Miss Er? Or should I say Ms.?” I smiled weakly, as I always do, and proffered “Why don’t you call me Rose?” Which created a little stir, as it is not my name.

On the way back Mr. Simister said that he considered it a great success, more than somewhat, and was sure they were all most grateful. My hands were clammy from the touch of the science fantasists, there was a felt-tip mark on my cuff, and I was hungry.

‘By the way, I expect you have eaten,’ Mr. Simister said. I sank down in my seat. I didn’t know why he should expect anything of the sort, but I made an instant decision in favor of starvation, rather than go to some establishment with him where the members of the Book Group might be lurking under a tablecloth or hanging from a hat stand, upside down like bats.

I stood in the hall of Eccles House, and shook drops of water from myself. There was an immanent odor of aged cooking oil. Supper over, then: all chips fried? An indoor smog hovered, about head height. From the shadows at the foot of the stairs, the small girl materialized. She gazed up at me. “We don’t normally get ladies,” she said. Her tongue, I realized, was too big for her mouth. She had a rustle in her speech, as if the god that made her was rubbing his dry palms together.



“What are you doing?” I said. “Why are you, why are you still on duty?”

There was a clatter behind a half-open door, the bump and rattle of bottles knocked together, and then the scraping of a crate across the floor. A second later, “Mr. Webley!” someone called.

Another voice called, “What the fuck now?” A small dirty man in a waistcoat tumbled out of an office, leaving the door gaping on a capsizing tower of box files. “Ah, the writer!” he said.

It wasn’t I who had called him out. But I was enough to make him linger. Perhaps he thought he was going to filch the regular writer business from Rosemount. He stared at me; he walked around me for a while; he did everything but finger my sleeve. He rose on his toes and thrust his face into mine.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

I took a step backward. I trampled the small girl. I felt the impress of my heel in flesh. She wormed her flinching foot from under mine. She uttered not a sound.

“Louise—” the man said. He sucked his teeth, considering her. “Fuck off out of it,” he said.

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I BOLTED UPSTAIRS then, stopping only on the second landing. The whole evening was taking on a heightened, crawling quality. These men called sinister and webley; I thought they might know each other. I have to face a night in that room, I thought, with no company, and see what sort of sheets they keep beneath that turd-colored candlewick cover. For a moment I was uncertain whether to go up or down. I’d not sleep if I didn’t eat, but out there was the rain, a moonless night in a strange town, miles from the center and I have no map; I could send for a taxi and tell the driver to take me somewhere to eat, because that’s what they do in books, but people never do in life, do they?

I stood debating this with myself, and saying come now, come now, what would Anita Brookner do? Then I saw something move,

above me; just a faint stir of the air, against the prevailing fug. My left eye was by now malfunctioning quite badly, and there were jagged holes in the world to that side of my head, so I had to turn my whole body to be sure of what I saw. There in the darkness was the small girl, standing above me. How? My poor heart—not yet diagnosed—gave one sunken knock against my ribs; but my head said coolly, emergency stairs? Goods lift?

She came down, silent, intent, the worn tread muffling the scrape of her shoe. “Louise,” I said. She put her hand on my arm. Her face, turned up toward me, seemed luminous. “He always says that,” she murmured. “Eff off out.”

“Are you related to him?” I asked.

“Oh no.” She wiped some drool from her chin. “Nothing like that.”

“Don’t you get time off?”

“No, I have to clear the ashtrays last thing, I have to wash up in the bar. They laugh at me, them men. Saying, han’t you got a boyfriend, Louise? Calling me, ‘Hippy.’ ”

IN THE ROOM, I hung my coat on the outside of the wardrobe, ready to go; it is a way of cheering myself up, that I learned in the hotel in Berlin. My cheeks burned. I could feel the sting of the insults, the sniggering day by day; but “Hippy” seemed a mild name, when you consider ... The appalling thought came to me that she was some sort of test. I was like a reporter who finds an orphan in a war zone, some ringwormed toddler squawking in the ruins. Are you supposed to just report on it; or pick up the creature and smuggle it home, to learn English and grow up in the Home Counties?

THE NIGHT, PREDICTABLY, was shot through with car alarms, snatches of radio playing from other rooms, and the distant roaring of chained animals. I dreamed of Rosemount, its walls fading around me, its bay windows melting into air. Once, half-awake, tossing under the fungoid counterpane, I thought I smelled gas. I tumbled into sleep

again and smelled gas in my dream: and here were the members of the Book Group rolling from beneath my bed, sniggering as they plugged the chinks round the windows and door with the torn pages of their manuscripts. Gasping, I woke. A question hovered in the fetid air. Just what *did* prompt your foray into biography, Miss Er? Come to that, what prompted your foray into foraying? What prompted anything at all?

I was downstairs by six-thirty. The day was fine. I was hollow at my center, and in a vicious temper. The door stood open, and a wash of light ran over the carpet like sun-warmed margarine.

My taxi—prebooked, as always, for a quick getaway—was at the curb. I looked around, cautious, for Mr. Webley. Already a haze was beginning to overlay Eccles House. Smokers' coughs rattled down the passages, and the sound of hawking, and the flushing of lavatories.

Something touched my elbow. Louise had arrived beside me, noiseless. She wrested the bag from my hand. "You came down by yourself," she whispered. Her face was amazed. "You should have called me. I'd have come. Are you not having your breakfast?"

She sounded shocked, that anyone should refuse food. Did Webley feed her, or did she scavenge? She raised her eyes to my face, then cast them down. "If I hadn't just come now," she said, "you'd have gone. And never said bye-bye."

We stood at the curb together. The air was mild. The driver was reading his *Star*. He didn't look up.

"Might you come back?" Louise whispered.

"I don't think so."

"I mean, one of these days?"

I never doubted this: if I told her to get into the taxi, she would do it. Away we'd go: me rattled, afraid of the future; her trusting and yellow, her mad eyes shining into mine. But what then? I asked myself. What would we do then? And have I the right? She is an adult, however short. She has a family somewhere. I stared down at

her. Her face, in full daylight, was patchily jaundiced as if dyed with cold tea; her broad smooth forehead was mottled with deeper blotches, the size and color of old copper coins. I could have wept. Instead, I took my purse out of my bag, peered inside it, took out a twenty-pound note, and squeezed it into her hand. “Louise, will you buy yourself something nice?”

I didn’t look into her face. I just got into the taxi. My migraine aura was now so severe that the world on the left had ceased to exist, except as an intermittent yellow flash. I was nauseated, by inanition and my own moral vacuity. But by the time the cab crawled up to the station approach, I was getting a bit satirical, *faute de mieux*, and thinking, well, for sure A. S. Byatt would have managed it better: only I can’t quite think how.

When I got to the station, and paid the driver, I found I had only £1.50 left. The cash machine was out of order. Of course, I had a credit card, and if there had been a dining service I could have paid for my breakfast on board. But there was, the announcement said, “a buffet car, situated toward the rear of the train,” and five minutes after we pulled out a boy came to sit beside me on my right: one of the sons of the town, eating from a cardboard box a grayish pad of meat which shined his fingers with fat.

WHEN I ARRIVED home, I threw my bag into a corner as if I hated it, and standing in the kitchen—last night’s washing up not done, and two wineglasses, I noticed—I ate a single cheese cracker dry out of the tin. Back to work, I thought. Sit down and type. Or you might just die of a surfeit.

In the next few weeks, my biography took some unexpected turns. Aunt Virginie and the Mexican got into the text quite a lot. I began to make versions in which Aunt Virginie and the Mexican ran off together, and in which (therefore) my subject had never been born. I could see them speeding across Europe on an adulterous spree, accompanied by the sound of shattering glass: drinking spa towns dry of champagne and breaking the bank at Monte Carlo. I made up

that the Mexican went home with the proceeds and led a successful revolution, with Aunt Virginie featuring in it as a sort of La Pasionaria figure: but with dancing, as if Isadora Duncan had got into it somehow. It was all very different from my previous work.

IN THE EARLY autumn of that year, three months after my trip east, I was at Waterloo Station, on my way to give a talk at a branch library in Hampshire. I had no opinion, now, of the catering anywhere in England. As I turned from the sandwich counter, balancing a baguette I meant to carry carefully to Alton, a tall young man bumped into me and knocked my purse flying from my hand.

It was a full purse, bulging with change, and the coins went wheeling and flying among the feet of fellow travelers, spinning and scattering over the slippery floor. My luck was in, because the people streaming through from Eurostar began laughing and chasing my small fortune, making it a sport to chase every penny and trap it: perhaps they thought it was converse begging, or some sort of London custom, like Pearly Kings. The young man himself bobbed and weaved among the European feet, and eventually it was he who emptied a handful of change back into my purse, with a wide white smile, and, just for a second, pressed my hand to reassure me. Amazed, I gazed up into his face: he had large blue eyes, a shy yet confident set to him; he was six foot and lightly bronzed, strong but softly polite, his jacket of indigo linen artfully crumpled, his shirt a dazzling white; he was, in all, so clean, so sweet, so golden, that I backed off, afraid he must be American and about to convert me to some cult.

When I arrived at the library, an ambitious number of chairs—fifteen, at first count—were drawn up in a semicircle. Most were filled: a quiet triumph, no? I did my act on autopilot, except that when it came to my influences I went a bit wild and invented a Portuguese writer who I said knocked Pessoa into a cocked hat. The golden young man kept invading my mind, and I thought I'd quite like to go to bed with someone of that ilk, by way of a change.

Wasn't everybody due a change? But he was a different order of being from me: a person on another plane. As the evening wore on, I began to feel chilly, and exposed, as if a wind were whistling through my bones.

I SAT up for a while, in a good enough bed in a clean enough room, reading *The Right Side of Midnight*, making marginal annotations, and wondering why I'd ever thought the public might like it. My cheek burned on a lumpy pillow, and the usual images of failure invaded me; but then, about three o'clock I must have slept.

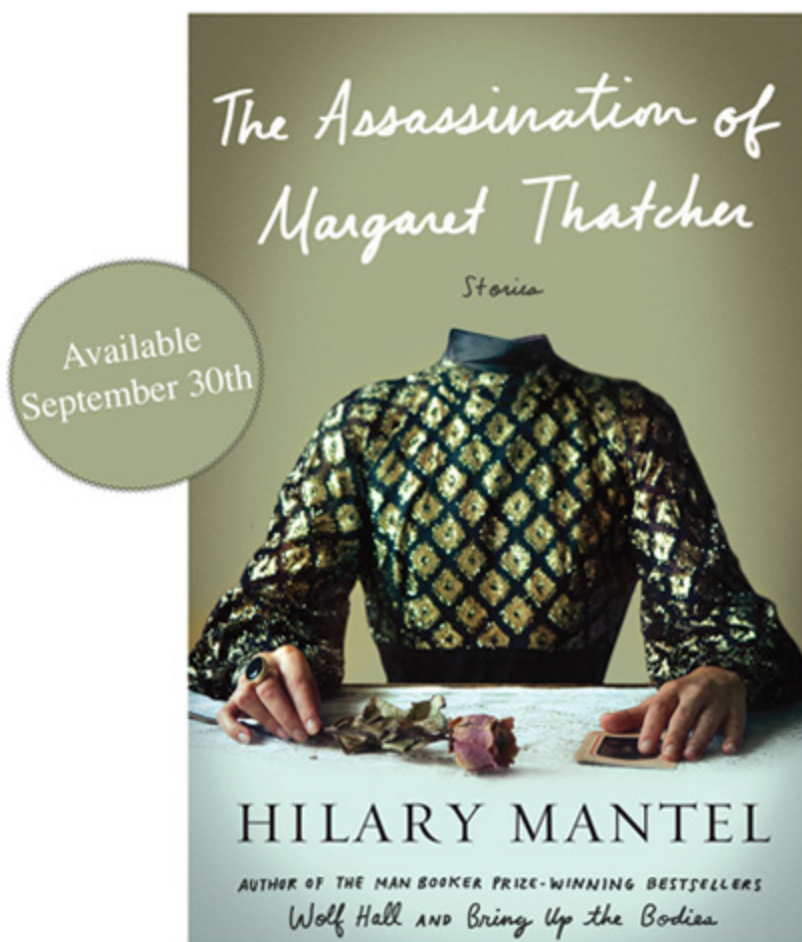
I woke refreshed, from no dreams: in a cider-apple dawn, a fizz and sharpness in the air. Out of bed, I rejoiced to see that someone had scrubbed the shower. I could bear to step into it, and did. Cold soft water ran over my scalp. My eyes stretched wide open. What was this? A turning point?

I was on the crowded train for eight, my fingers already twitching for my notebook. We had scarcely pulled out of the station when a grinning young steward bounced a laden trolley down the aisle. Seeing his Ginormous Harvest Cookies, his Golden Toastie Crunches in cellophane wrap, the men around me flapped their copies of the *Financial Times* at him, and began to jab their fingers, chattering excitedly. "Tea?" the steward exclaimed. "My pleasure, sir! Small or large?"

I noticed Large was just Small with more water, but I was swept away, infused by the general bonhomie. I took out my purse, and when I opened it I saw with surprise that the Queen's heads were tidily stacked, pointing upward. And was there one more head than I'd expected? I frowned. My fingers flicked the edges of the notes. I'd left home with eighty pounds. It seemed I was coming back with a round hundred. I was puzzled (as the steward handed me my Large Tea); but only for a moment. I remembered the young man with his broad white smile and his ashen hair streaked with gold; the basted perfection of his firm flesh, and the grace of his hand

clasping mine. I slotted the notes back inside, slid my purse away, and wondered: which of my defects did he notice first?

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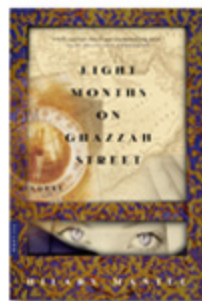
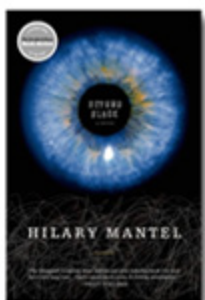


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For information, address Henry Holt and Co., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York,  
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eISBN: 978-1466881815

“How Shall I Know You?” was first published in the *London Review of Books*, 2000, and reprinted in *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher: Stories* (Henry Holt, 2014).

First eBook Edition: August 2014

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