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Martin, Maggie, and Me

In an excerpt from his forthcoming memoir, the author recalls his 1970s conquest of London's ink-stained thickets, some disastrous "research" with Martin Amis at a New York bordello, and encounters with everyone from Ian McEwan to Thomas Pynchon to Margaret Thatcher.

By **Christopher Hitchens**
June 2010



Christopher Hitchens, James Fenton, and Martin Amis at Sacré-Coeur, in Paris, 1979.

Excerpted from *Hitch 22: A Memoir*, by Christopher Hitchens, to be published this month by Twelve; © 2010 by the author.

My friendship with the Hitch has always been perfectly cloudless. It is a love whose month is ever May. —Martin Amis, *The Independent*, January 15, 2007.

Events elicited the above tribute from Martin only after the mid-September of our real lives, when the press had been making the very most of a disagreement we had been having in print in the summer of 2002 about Stalin and Trotsky. Looking back, though, I am inclined to date the burgeoning refulgence of our love to something more like the calendar equivalent of April. Still, it was actually in the gloomy autumn of 1973, around the time of the Yom Kippur/Ramadan War, between Israel and Egypt, that we properly met. To anchor the moment in time: Salvador Allende had just been murdered by Pinochet in Chile, W. H. Auden had died, James Fenton (the author of the most beautiful poems to come out of the Second Indochina War) had won an Eric Gregory Award for poetry and used the money to go off and live in Vietnam and Cambodia, and at the age of 24 I had been hired to fill at least some of the void that he left behind at the *New Statesman*. Peter Ackroyd, literary editor of the rival and raffishly Tory *Spectator*, was giving me a drink one evening after returning from a trip of his own to the Middle East, and he said in that inimitable quacking and croaking and mirthful voice of his, "I've got someone I think you should meet." When he told me the name, I rather offhandedly said that I believed we'd once met already, with Fenton at Oxford. Anyway, it was agreed that we would make up a threesome on the following evening, at the same sawdust-infested



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wine bar, called the Bung Hole, where my *New Statesman* career had begun.

Lovers often invest their first meetings with retrospective significance, as if to try to conjure the elements of the numinous out of the stubborn witness of the everyday. I can remember it all very well: Ackroyd doing his best to be a good host (it's a fearsome responsibility to promise two acquaintances that they will be sure to get along well with each other) and Martin rather languid and understated. He did not, for example, even pretend to remember when I said we had met before with our other mutual friend, James Fenton. (It is characteristic of Martin to have pointed out that Dickens's title *Our Mutual Friend* contains, or is, a solecism. One can have common friends but not mutual ones.) A verse letter to Martin from Australian poet Clive James, published in *Encounter* at about this period, described his "stubby, Jaggerish appearance," and I remember this because of how very exact it seemed. He was more blond than Jagger and indeed rather shorter, but his sensuous lower lip was a crucial feature, and there was no doubt that you would always know when he had come into the room.

His office performed, Ackroyd withdrew, and the remaining pair of us later played some desultory pinball in another bar. He asked me which novelists I enjoyed, and I first mentioned Graham Greene: this answer palpably did not excite him with its adventurousness. In answer to my reciprocal question he said he thought that one had to look for something between the twin peaks of Dickens and Nabokov, and it came back to me that Fenton had said to me how almost frighteningly "assured" all Martin's literary essays were turning out to be. I don't recollect how the evening ended.

But some kind of mutuality had been stirred, and we soon enough had dinner with our respective girlfriends in some Cypriot taverna in Camden Town, where things went with a swing and I can remember making him laugh. Then my mother died, and I vanished from London and from life for a bit, to discover on my return that Martin had taken the trouble to write me a brief, well-phrased, memorable note of condolence. The next I knew, I was invited to a small party to celebrate the publication of his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*.

A lot of friendships absolutely depend upon
a sort of shared language.

In the Beginning

Chat about this literary debut had been in the wind for a while, and Martin had an editorial position at *The Times Literary Supplement* as well as a mounting reputation as a reviewer and (which of course could be made to irk him) the same surname as one of the most famous novelists writing in English. Thus it seemed rather odd that he should be throwing his own book party, in his own small and shared flat, at his own expense. But I am glad of it, because those of us who had the good luck and good taste to attend were later able to reminisce rather triumphantly.

The 1973–74 apparel was absurd, of course: cowboy boots and flared trousers for some of the men (those ill-advised crosshatched blue jeans, designed to resemble armor, for me in particular) and Christ knows what for the girls. Sobriety and corduroy were supplied, however, by Amis senior (Kingsley) and by his friend Robert Conquest, the great poet and even greater historian of Stalinism. Then there was Clive James, dressed as usual like someone who had assembled his wardrobe in the pitch-dark, but always "on" and always awash in cross-references and apt allusions. The presence of these few but gravity-donating figures, plus the climb up the stairs from Pont Street on the fringes of Chelsea, made me nervous underneath for a time.

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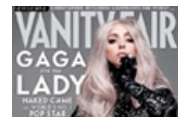
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made me conserve my breath for a time.

I find now that I can more or less acquit myself on any charge of having desired Martin carnally. (My looks by then had in any case declined to the point where only women would go to bed with me.) What eventuated instead was the most *heterosexual* relationship that one young man could conceivably have with another. As the days became weeks, and the months became seasons, and as we fell happily into the habit of lunching and dining and party-going à deux, there began an inexhaustible conversation, about womanhood in all its forms and varieties and permutations, that saw us through several episodes of sexual drought as well as through some periods of embarrassment of riches.

Unspoken in our circle was a deep divide between left and increasingly anti-left.

I would love to be able to give the impression that it was a relationship between equals but, if represented in cartoon form, the true picture would be closer to one of those great white sharks that evolution has fitted out with an accompanying but rather smaller fish. I would turn up at parties with Martin, to be sure, but with a somewhat resigned attitude. At one soirée in Holland Park, he was introduced to a young woman with a result that was as close as made no difference to witnessing a lightning strike or a thunderbolt. His then girlfriend was present at the party, as I think was the other young lady's husband, but what then happened in the adjoining room was unstoppable and seemed somehow fore-ordained. We both knew that the subsequent pregnancy was almost certainly also a consequent one, but so gentlemanly was the husband in the case that it was not until two decades later that Martin received the letter about his missing daughter, the lovely Delilah Seale, his "bonding" with whom—there doesn't seem to be another word for it—is one of the most affecting things I have ever chanced to see.

Over the course of the next several years, we were still able to indulge in creative time wasting by talking—always with ardent respect, but always exhaustively and until there was absolutely nothing left to say—about women, different women, and sometimes the same woman. And then the talk would turn to other things.

Martin never let friendship take precedence over his first love, which was and is the English language. If one employed a lazy or stale phrase, it would be rubbed in—no, it would be incisively *emphasized*—with a curl of that mighty lip and an ironic gesture. If one committed the offense in print—I remember once writing "no mean achievement" in an article—the rebuke might come in note form, or by one's being handed a copy of the article with a penciled underlining. He could take this vigilance to almost parodic lengths. The words "ruggedly handsome features" appear on the first page of *1984*, and for a while Martin declined to go any further into the book. ("The man can't write worth a damn.") He was later to admit that the novel did improve a trifle after that. Years later—in 2001, when I gave him the manuscript of my book on Orwell, he brought it to our next rendezvous, at a Manhattan bistro, Café Un Deux Trois, on West 44th Street, and wordlessly handed it back. He had gone through it page by page, painstakingly correcting my pepper-shaker punctuation.

He seemed to have read everything and he had the rare faculty of being able to quote longish staves of prose from memory. In this area, too, I felt myself the junior. It was he who got me to read Nabokov (when I went off to Cyprus in 1975) and to do so with care as well as with awe, if only because I knew I would be asked questions. However, I was able to return the favor in a way which was to help change his life in turn, by pressing on him a copy of *Humboldt's Gift*.

I was also lucky in meeting Martin when his relationship with his father was at its absolute best. I remember envying the way in which the two of them could tell jokes without inhibition, discuss matters sexual, and compete only over minor differences about literature or politics. There had once been a bad time when Martin and his siblings (and

his mother) had been abandoned by the old man, and there was to come a moment when that same old man metamorphosed into an elderly man, querulous and paranoid and devoid of wit. But in between there was a wonderful golden late summer. “Dad, will you make some of your noises?” It was easy to see, when this invitation was taken up, where Martin had acquired his own gift for mimicry. Kingsley could “do” the sound of a brass band approaching on a foggy day. He could become the District-line train entering the Edgware Road station. He could be four wrecked tramps coughing in a bus shelter. (This was very demanding and once led to heart palpitations.) To create the hiss and crackle of a wartime radio broadcast delivered by Franklin Delano Roosevelt was for him scant problem. (A tape of it, indeed, was played at his memorial service, where I was hugely honored to be among the speakers.) The *pièce de résistance*, an attempt by British soldiers to start up a frozen two-ton truck on a windy morning “somewhere in Germany,” was for special occasions only. One held one’s breath as Kingsley emitted the first screech of the busted ignition key. His only slightly lesser vocal achievement—of a motorbike yelling in mechanical agony—once caused a man who had just parked his own machine in the street to turn back anxiously and take a look. The old boy’s imitation of an angry dog barking the words “fuck off” was note-perfect.

Lingua Franca

I boldly assert, in fact I think I know, that a lot of friendships and connections absolutely depend upon a sort of shared language, or slang. Not necessarily designed to exclude others, this can establish a certain comity and, even after a long absence, re-establish it in a second. Martin was—is—a genius at this sort of thing. It arose—arises—from his willingness to devote real time to the pitiless search for the apt resonance. He did not scorn the demotic or the American: in fact he remains almost unique in the way that he can blend pub talk and mid-Atlantic idiom into paragraphs and pages that are also fully aware of Milton and Shakespeare. Martin had a period of relishing the Boston thug-writer George V. Higgins, author of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. Higgins’s characters had an infectious way of saying “inna” and “onna,” so Martin would say, for example, “I think this lunch should be onna Hitch” or “I heard he wasn’t that useful inna sack.” Simple pleasures, you may say, but linguistic sinew is acquired in this fashion, and he would not dump a trope until he had chewed all the flesh and pulp of it and was left only with pith and pips. Thus there arrived a day when Park Lane played host to a fancy new North American hotel with the no less fancy name of the Inn on the Park and he suggested a high-priced cocktail there for no better reason than that he could instruct the cabdriver to “park inna Inn onna Park.” This near palindrome (as I now think of it) gave us much innocent pleasure.

Displeasures of the Flesh

Not all of our pleasures were innocent. There came the day in 1981 when we were both in New York and both beginning to feel the long, strong gravitational pull of the great American planet, but where meanwhile it was necessary to perform a slight chore. In the midterm churnings of what was to become his breakout novel, *Money* (1984), Martin required his character to visit a brothel or knocking shop. He even had one all picked out: its cover name was “Tahitia,” a dire Polynesian-themed massage parlor, on lower Lexington Avenue. “And you,” Martin informed me, “are fucking well coming with me.” I wanted to say something girlish like “Have I ever refused you anything?” but instead settled for something rather more masculine like “Do we know the form at this joint?” I could not possibly have felt less like any such expedition: I had a paint-stripping hangover and a sour mouth, but he had that look of set purpose on his face that I well knew, and also knew could not be gainsaid. How bad could it be?

I was lucky in meeting Martin when his
relationship with Kingsley was at its best.

Pretty damn bad, as it turned out. Of the numerous regrettable elements that go to make up the unlawful carnal-knowledge industry, I should single out for distinction

the look of undisguised contempt that is often worn on the faces of its female staff. Some of the working “hostesses” may have to simulate delight or even interest—itsself a pretty cock-shriveling thought—but when these same ladies do the negotiating, they can shrug off the fake charm as a snake discards an unwanted skin. I suppose they know, or presume, that they have already got the despised male client exactly where they want him. As it happens, this wasn't true in our case—I would gladly have paid not to have sex at this point, and Martin needed only to snap his fingers in order to enjoy female company—but the cynical little witches at the Tahitia were not to know that they were being conscripted into the service of literature. It was well said—by Jean Tarrow in *The Plague*, I think—that listening to lectures in an unknown language will help to hone one's awareness of the passage of time. I once had the experience of being “water-boarded” and can now dimly appreciate how much every second counts in the experience of the torture victim, forced to go on enduring what is unendurable. But not even the lapse of time between then and now has numbed my recollection of how truly horrible it was to be faking interest in someone who was being paid—and paid rather more, incidentally, than I could afford—to contemptuously feign an interest in me. The multiplier effect of this mutual degradation gave me dry heaves and flop sweats and, I began to fear, conveyed the entirely misleading impression of my being a customer who was convulsed by the hectic sickness of lust. The seconds went limping and dragging by on absolutely leaden feet.

It was the cash question, though, that saved me. With some presence of mind, I had for once pre-empted Martin, in the “bar” of the dump, where the gruesome selection process began, by swiftly pointing to the prettiest and slenderest of those available (who also possessed one of the most vicious-looking smiles I have ever seen on a human face). Once removed to her sinister cubicle, we commenced to bargain. Or, rather, in a sort of squalid reverse haggle, every time I agreed to the price she added some tax or surcharge and bid me higher. Clad by now only in some sort of exiguous sarong, and equipped only with a dank ziplock bag containing my credit cards and money (one was obliged to “check” everything else before entering the humid “bar”), I wearily started to count out the ever steepening fee, which was the only thing in the room that showed any sign of enlarging itself. It turned out that, what with tips and percentages and whatnot, the avaricious bitch had contrived a figure that was not just more than I could afford but more than I had on me. I was down to the quarters and nickels, and it showed. She had, I will say for her, more pride than that. A handful of change thrown in ... No. No one can be expected to take this. So I took her cue of rage and stood up with about as much self-esteem as I could wrap around myself. Here was a two-faced coin of luck: I not only didn't have to go through with it but didn't have to shell out the dough, either.

I lurked torpidly in the recovery room, or whatever they call it, and was eventually joined by a rather reduced and chastened Martin. If you want to know what happened to him, the whole experience enriched and enhanced by what I confessed to him of what had happened to me, you must read pages 96 to 101 of the Penguin edition of *Money*, where John Self tries to get laid for pay “under the bam, under the boo,” at a perfectly foul establishment named “the Happy Isles.” There are many, many reasons why *Money* is the Great English Novel of the 1980s, to which I am able to add this ensuing insight. Out of our grim little encounter (where he, poor bastard, actually had to part with the cash and endure a sexual fiasco) came several paragraphs of pure reality-based fantasy that make me twist and snarl with laughter every time. And, no, you most definitely do not have to have been there.

I can more or less acquit myself of having
desired Martin carnally.

Demon Lunchers of Fleet Street

The same could not be said of the “Friday lunch” that has now become the potential stuff of a new “Bloomsbury” legend. I find I want to try to limit myself on this subject, because

the temptation to be in ought to be resisted, and also because in this instance you probably do indeed have to have “been there.” I also bear in mind what Fenton once told me about the first Bloomsbury: In the early days of tape recording it was decided to make a secret tape of the brilliant conversation of Raymond Mortimer. All who were in on the plan were later agreed that Mortimer and the others had been at their most scintillating on the afternoon concerned. But when replayed, the tape was as dull as rain. So the first thing to say about this luncheon circle was that, like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it just “grow'd.” There was never the intention or design that it become a “set” or a “circle,” and of course if there had been any such intention, the thing would have been abortive. The Friday lunch began to simply “occur” in the mid-1970s, and persisted into the early 1980s, and is now cemented in place in several memoirs and biographies (most memorably Clive James's title *North Face of Soho*). Let me try to tell you something of how it was.

It began, largely at Martin's initiation, as a sort of end-of-the-week clearinghouse for gossip and jokes, based on the then proximity of *The Observer*, the *New Statesman*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*, at that odd margin of old London where Fleet Street and Bloomsbury met. Reliable founding attendees included the Australian poets Clive James and Peter Porter, Craig Raine (T. S. Eliot's successor as poetry editor at Faber and Faber), *The Observer's* literary editor, Terry Kilmartin (whose translation of Marcel Proust supplanted Scott Moncrieff's version, and the only man trusted by Gore Vidal to edit his copy without further permission), and the cartoonist and rake and dandy Mark Boxer, whose illustrations then graced (for once the word is quite apt) all the best book covers—including the dozen volumes of Anthony Powell's masterwork, *A Dance to the Music of Time*—as well as *The Times* of London's op-ed page. Among Mark's aesthetic and social verdicts the one I remember being delivered with the most authority was his decided and long-meditated conclusion that “it's the height of bad manners to sleep with somebody less than three times.” (Once, planning a party with Martin and myself, he completed the formal task of inviting all those who simply had to be asked, and then exclaimed with relief and delight, “From now on, we should go on the basis of *looks alone*.”) The critic Russell Davies, the then rising novelists Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes, James Fenton and Robert Conquest when they were in England, Kingsley when he wasn't otherwise engaged with yet more lavish and extensive lunches, and your humble servant helped to complete this *dramatis personae*. There were no women, or no regular ones, and nothing was ever said, or explicitly resolved, about this fact. Between us, we were believed to “control” a lot of the reviewing space in London, and much envious and paranoid comment was made then, and has been made since, to the effect that we vindicated or confirmed Dr. F. R. Leavis's nightmare of a conspiratorial London literary establishment. But I can remember only one occasion when a book was brought along to lunch (Michael Wharton's collection of “Peter Simple” columns, to be given to me so that I could “fill in” for some reviewer who had failed at the last moment), and I truly don't think that this “counts.”

Time spent recollecting the little Bohemia we foregathered in several tryout places before settling on a villainous Turkish-Cypriot kebab house on the fringes of Bloomsbury called the Bursa—sharing cheap kebabs and hummus and retsina and dividing up a bill that never quite seemed to reflect the low value of the nosh—confirms three related but contrasting things for me. The first was the pervasive cultural influence of Philip Larkin. The second was the importance of word games and the long, exhaustive process that makes them both live and become worthwhile. The third was the gradual but ineluctable rise of Margaret Thatcher and her transatlantic counterpart Ronald Reagan. These, then, will be my excuses and pretexts while I “let in daylight upon magic,” as the essayist Walter Bagehot phrased it.

In a *New Statesman* piece, I said in passing that I thought Mrs. Thatcher was surprisingly sexy.

Unspoken in our circle was quite a deep divide between left and, if not exactly right, yet increasingly anti-left. Fenton and I were still quite Marxist in our own way, even if our cohort was of the heterodox type that I tried to describe earlier. Kingsley had become increasingly vocally right-wing, it often seeming to outsiders that he was confusing the state of the country with the condition of his own liver (but please see his letters of the time to notice how cogent he often still was). Clive and Martin had been hugely impressed—as who indeed had not?—by the emergence of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn as a moral and historical titan witnessing for truth against the state-sponsored lie. In between, men like Terry and Mark found it difficult to repudiate their dislike for a Tory Party that had been the main enemy in their youth. Robert Conquest was and still is the most distinguished and authoritative anti-Communist (and ex-Communist) writing in English, but if this subject was excluded, his politics tended toward something fairly equably social democratic in temper. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he and I agreed that the Moscow Olympics should be boycotted, and of course it was he who noticed that an aquatic event was being held in one of the Baltic States, the Russian annexation of which had never been recognized by the post-Yalta agreements that defined the Cold War. At the last Friday lunch I ever attended, before emigrating to the United States, in 1981, a toast was raised to Bob's impending fourth—or was it fifth?—marriage. “Well,” he replied modestly, “I thought perhaps ‘one for the road.’” Philip Larkin wrote gloomily to Kingsley that the new Texan spouse would probably make their old friend move permanently to America, “as all Yank bags do.” And so indeed it proved. Elizabeth—or “Liddie”—is a bit more than “the other half”: she is a great scholar in her own person and the anchor of one of the most successful late marriages on record. Once Martin and I had also married Americans, she printed a T-shirt for all concerned that read, YANK BAGS CLUB.

I learned appreciably from registering the cross-currents that underlay this apparently light but really quite serious lunch. Our common admiration for Larkin, as a poet if not as a man, arose from the bleak honesty with which he confronted the fucked-up—the expression must be allowed—condition of the country in those years. It was his use of that phrase—“They fuck you up, your mum and dad,” as the opening line of his masterly “This Be the Verse”—that put him outside the pale of the “family values” community.

Clive James was in some ways the chief whip of the lunch and would often ring round to make sure that there was a quorum (though I noticed that whenever Martin was away his enthusiasm waned a bit, as did everyone else's). He needed an audience and damn well deserved one. His authority with the hyperbolic metaphor is, I think, unchallenged. Arnold Schwarzenegger resembled “a brown condom full of walnuts.” Of an encounter with some bore with famous halitosis Clive once announced, “By this time his breath was *undoing my tie*.” I well remember the day in 1978 when he delivered his review of a biography of Leonid Brezhnev to the *New Statesman* and Martin read its opening paragraphs out loud: “Here is a book so dull that a whirling dervish could read himself to sleep with it. If you were to recite even a single page in the open air, birds would fall out of the sky and dogs drop dead.” One could *hear* his twanging marsupial tones in his scorn for this world-class drone and bully (the work was being “published” by the ever servile and mercenary tycoon Robert Maxwell, one of the Labour Party's many sources of shame). Clive had given up alcohol after a long period of enjoying a master-servant relationship with it, in which unfortunately the role of the booze had been played by Dirk Bogarde. He thus threw in money only for the food part of the bill, until one day he noticed how much the restaurant charged for awful muck such as bitter lemon and tonic water. At this he moaned with theatrical remorse, “I owe you all several hundred pounds!” But not all was geniality and verve: the only rift in the Friday fraternity came when Clive took huge exception to Fenton's *Sunday Times* review of his (actually quite bad) 1981 verse play about the rise of Prince Charles. The expression complained of, I seem to recall, was “This is the worst poem of the twentieth century.” The ensuing chill went on for a bit.

The Comfort of Friends

There could have been no bad time to meet him, but this in retrospect seems to have been the perfect moment to become acquainted with Ian McEwan. It was Martin who brought us together (Ian having succeeded him, in 1976, as the winner of the Somerset Maugham Award). By then, “everyone” had been mesmerized by Ian's early collections of short

stories, *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*. Met in person, he seemed at first to possess some of the same vaguely unsettling qualities as his tales. He never raised his voice, surveyed the world in a very level and almost affectless fashion through moon-shaped granny glasses, wore his hair in bangs, was rail-thin, showed an interest in what Martin used to call “hippie-ish” pursuits, and when I met him was choosing to live on the fringes of the then weed-infested “frontline” black ghetto in Brixton. “What he wrote, you could see,” as Clive James put it when using Ian’s character in his first novel (*Brilliant Creatures*), and when it came to fiction he seemed to have contact with other, remoter spheres. (He could, and still can, for example, write about childhood and youth with an almost eerie ability to think and feel his way back into it: a faculty that many superb writers are unable to recruit in themselves.) I was sitting at my *New Statesman* desk one afternoon in 1978 when the telephone rang and a strange voice asked for me by name. After I had confirmed that it was indeed me, or I, the voice said, “This is Thomas Pynchon speaking.” I am glad that I did not say what I first thought of saying, because he was soon enough able to demonstrate that it was he, and that a mutual friend (make that a common friend) named Ian McEwan had suggested that he call. Larry Kramer’s ultra-homosexual effort *Faggots* had been seized by the British Customs and Excise, and all the impounded copies were in danger of being destroyed. Mr. Pynchon was somewhere in England and was mightily distressed by this. What could be done? Could I raise an outcry, as Pynchon had been assured by Ian I could? I told him that one could protest hoarsely and long but that Britain had no law protecting free speech or forbidding state censorship. We chatted a bit longer, I artlessly offered to call him back, and he laughingly declined this transparent try-on and faded back into the world where only McEwan could find him. (Ian seemed to be able to manage this sort of thing without ever boasting of it: he also formed a friendship with the almost-impossible-to-find Milan Kundera.)

Between us, we were believed to “control” a lot of the reviewing space in London.

From this you may surmise that Ian was not part of any pronounced drift to the political or cultural right. But nor was he someone who had stopped reflecting at approximately the time of Woodstock. His father had been a regular officer in a British Army regiment. He had a serious working knowledge of military history. His love of the natural world and of wildlife, leading to the arduously contemplative hikes about which we teased him, was matched by an interest in the “hard” sciences. I think that he did, at one stage in his life, dabble a bit in what’s loosely called “New Age,” but in the end it was the rigorous side that won out, and his novels are almost always patrolling some difficult frontier between the speculative and the unseen and the ways in which material reality reimposes itself. When not talking with penetration about literature and music, he was in himself an acute register of the stresses, cultural and moral, that were remaking the old British political divide.

Naughty Maggie

One day, or actually one night, I made another saunter across the bridge of that divide to test the temperature and conditions on the other side. The circumstances could hardly have been more propitious for me: the Tories were having a reception in the House of Lords in order to launch a crusty old book by a crusty old peer named Lord Butler, and there was a rumor that the new female leader of the Conservative Party would be among those present for the cocktails. I had written a longish article for *The New York Times Magazine*, saying in effect that, if Labour could not revolutionize British society, then the task might well fall to the right. I had also written a shorter piece for the *New Statesman*, reporting from the Conservative Party conference and saying in passing that I thought Mrs. Thatcher was surprisingly sexy. (To this day, I have never had so much anger mail, saying, in effect, “How *could* you?”) I felt immune to Mrs. Thatcher in most other ways, since for all her glib “free market” advocacy on one front she seemed to be an emotional ally of the authoritarian and protectionist white-settler regime in Rhodesia. And it was this very thing that afforded me the opportunity to grapple with her so early in her career

very thing that afforded me the opportunity to grapple with her so early in her career.

At the party was Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, a poised and engaging chap with whom I'd had many debates in Rhodesia itself, both at the celebrated colonial bar of the Meikles hotel and in other, more rugged locations. I'd even taken him to meet Sir Roy Welensky, the tough old right-wing white trade-unionist and former prime minister, who had broken with the treasonous pro-apartheid riffraff around Ian Smith. "It's always seemed perfectly simple to me, Mr. Verse-torn," this old bulldog growled in the unmistakable accent of the region. "If you don't *like* blick min, then *don't* come and live in Ifrica." Worsthorne had granted the justice of this, as how could he not, and now felt that he owed me a small service in return. "Care to meet the new leader?" Who could refuse? Within moments, Margaret Thatcher and I were face-to-face.

Within moments, too, I had turned away and was showing her my buttocks. I suppose that I must give some sort of explanation for this. Almost as soon as we shook hands on immediate introduction, I felt that she knew my name and had perhaps connected it to the socialist weekly that had recently called her rather sexy. While she struggled adorably with this moment of pretty confusion, I felt obliged to seek controversy and picked a fight with her on a detail of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe policy. She took me up on it. I was (as it happened) right on the small point of fact, and she was wrong. But she maintained her wrongness with such adamant strength that I eventually conceded the point and even bowed slightly to emphasize my acknowledgment. "No," she said. "Bow *lower!*" Smiling agreeably, I bent forward a bit farther. "No, no," she trilled. "*Much* lower!" By this time, a little group of interested bystanders was gathering. I again bent forward, this time much more self-consciously. Stepping around behind me, she unmasked her batteries and smote me on the rear with the parliamentary order paper that she had been rolling into a cylinder behind her back. I regained the vertical with some awkwardness. As she walked away, she looked over her shoulder and gave an almost imperceptibly slight roll of the hip while mouthing the words "Naughty boy!"

I had and have eyewitnesses to this. At the time, though, I hardly believed it myself. It is only from a later perspective, looking back on the manner in which she slaughtered and cowed all the former male leadership of her party and replaced them with pliant tools, that I appreciate the premonitory glimpse—of what someone in another context once called "the smack of firm government"—that I had been afforded. Even at the time, as I left that party, I knew I had met someone rather impressive. And the worst of "Thatcherism," as I was beginning by degrees to discover, was the rodent slowly stirring in my viscera: the uneasy but unbanishable feeling that on some essential matters she might be right.

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