THE BACHELORS

Muriel Spark

Introduced by James Campbell

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I

Daylight was appearing over London, the great city of bachelors. Half-pint bottles of milk began to be stood on the doorsteps of houses containing single apartments from Hampstead Heath to Greenwich Park, and from Wanstead Flats to Putney Heath; but especially in Hampstead, especially in Kensington.

In Queen's Gate, Kensington, in Harrington Road, The Boltons, Holland Park, and in King's Road, Chelsea, and its backwaters, the bachelors stirred between their sheets, reached for their wound watches, and with waking intelligences noted the time; then, remembering it was Saturday morning, turned over on their pillows. But soon, since it was Saturday, most would be out on the streets shopping for their bacon and eggs, their week's supplies of breakfasts and occasional suppers; and these bachelors would set out early, before a quarter past ten, in order to avoid being jostled by the women, the legitimate shoppers.

At a quarter past ten, Ronald Bridges, aged thirty-seven, who during the week was assistant curator at a small museum of handwriting in the City of London, stopped in the Old Brompton Road to speak to his friend Martin Bowles, a barrister of thirty-five.

Ronald moved his old plastic shopping bag up and down twice, to suggest to Martin that it was a greater weight than it really was, and that the whole business was a bore.

‘Where,’ said Ronald, pointing to a package on the top of Martin’s laden bag, ‘did you get your frozen peas?’

‘Clayton’s.’

‘How much?’

‘One and six. That’s for a small packet; does for two. A large is two and six; six helpings.’

‘Terrible price,’ said Ronald, agreeably.

‘Your hand’s never out of your pocket,’ said Martin.

‘What else have you got there?’ Ronald said.

‘Cod. You bake it in yoghurt with a sprinkle of marjoram and it tastes like halibut. My old ma’s away for a fortnight with the old housekeeper.’

‘Marjoram, where do you get marjoram?’

‘Oh, Fortnum’s. You get all the herbs there. I get a bag of stuff every month. I do nearly all the shopping and most of the cooking since my old ma’s had her op. And old Carrie isn’t up to it now – she never was much of a cook.’

‘You must have it in you,’ said Ronald, ‘going all the way to Piccadilly for herbs.’

‘I usually work it in with something else,’ Martin said. ‘We like our herbs, Ma and I. Come on in here.’

He meant a coffee-bar. They sat beside their bags and sipped their espressos with contented languor.

‘I’ve forgotten Tide,’ said Ronald. ‘I must remember to get Tide.’

‘Don’t you make a list?’ said Martin.

‘No. I depend on my memory.’

‘I make a list,’ said Martin, ‘when my ma’s away. I always do the shopping at the weekends. When Ma’s at home she makes the list. It’s always unreadable, though.’

‘A waste of time,’ said Ronald, ‘if you’ve got a memory.’

‘Do you mind?’ said a girl who had just come into the

coffee shop. She was referring to Ronald's bag of shopping; it was taking up the seat which ran along the wall.

'Oh, sorry,' said Ronald, removing his bag and dumping it on the floor.

The girl sat down, and when the waitress came to serve her she said, 'I'm waiting for a friend.'

She had black hair drawn back in a high style, dark eyes, and an oval ballet-dancer's face. She returned the two bachelors' sleepy routine glance, then lit a cigarette and watched the door.

'New potatoes in the shops,' Ronald said.

'They're always in the shops,' said Martin, 'these days. In season and out of season. It's the same with everything: you can get new potatoes and new carrots all the year round now, and peas and spinach any time, and tomatoes in the spring, even.'

'At a price,' said Ronald.

'At a price,' Martin said. 'What bacon do you get?'

'I make do with streaky. I grudge breakfasts,' said Ronald.

'Same here.'

'Your hand's never out of your pocket,' Ronald said before Martin could say it.

A small narrow-built man came in the door and joined the girl, smiling at her with a sweet, spiritual expression.

He sat side by side with the girl on the wall-seat. He lifted the menu-card and spoke to her soundlessly from behind it.

'Good gracious me,' murmured Martin.

Ronald looked towards the man, whose body was now hidden by the girl at his side. Ronald observed the head, unable to see at first whether his hair was fair or silver-white, but soon it was plainly a mixture. He was thin, with a very pointed, anxious face and nose, and a grey-white lined skin. He would be about fifty-five. He wore a dark blue suit.

'Don't stare,' Martin said. 'He's on a charge and I'm prosecuting him. He's coming up again before the magistrates next week. He has to report to the police every day.'

'What for?'

'Fraudulent conversion and possibly other charges. Somebody in my chambers defended Seton ages ago. Not that it did either any good. Let's go.'

Ronald put down the newspaper in his hand.

'Tide,' said Ronald in the street. 'I really must remember Tide.'

'Which way are you going?'

'Across to Clayton's.'

'I'm going there too. I haven't got a lot of groceries on the list, I'm dining out four times next week. Where do you go on Sundays?'

'Oh, here and there,' Ronald said, 'there's always somebody.'

'I go to Leighton Buzzard if anyone comes home to keep Ma company,' said Martin. 'It's rather fun and a change at Leighton Buzzard. But if Isobel stays in London I go to her in London.' They had crossed the road.

'I've left my paper in the café,' Ronald said inexpertly. 'I'd better go back and fetch it. See you some time.'

'Feeling all right?' Martin said, as Ronald turned on the kerb to cross back over the road.

'Yes, oh, yes, it's only my paper.'

'Sure?' – for Martin was touchily aware of Ronald's epilepsy.

'Bye.' Ronald had crossed over.

He found the paper. He sat down again in a seat opposite the one he had recently occupied so that he could the more easily see the silver-yellow-haired man as he spoke in low tones effortful with convincingness, to the black-haired girl.

Ronald ordered coffee and a cream cake. He opened his paper, from the side of which, from time to time, he watched the man who was deeply explaining himself to the girl. Ronald could not decide where he had seen the man before; he could not even be sure of having done so. 'I'm becoming a prying old maid,' he said to himself as he left, to explain his return to the café, preferring to call himself a prying old maid than to acknowledge fully his real reason: that he had been simply testing his memory; for he could not leave alone any opportunity to try himself on the question whether his epilepsy would one day affect his mental powers or not.

'No,' the American specialist had said, irritable with the strain of putting a technical point into common speech, 'there is no reason why your intellect should be impaired except, of course, that you cannot exercise it to the full extent that would be possible were you able to follow and rise to the top of a normal career. But you ought to retain and indeed expand your present mental capacity. The seizures will be intermittent; let me put it that your seizures concern the brain but not the mind. You will learn to prepare for them physically in some degree but not to control them. They won't affect the mind except in so far as the emotional psychological disturbances affect it. That's not my department.'

Ronald had retained every one of these words importantly in his memory for the past fourteen years, aware that the specialist himself would possibly remember only the gist, and then only with the aid of his record cards. But Ronald held them tight, from time to time subjecting the words to every possible kind of interpretation. 'Let me put it that your seizures concern the brain, not the mind.' But he believes, Ronald argued with himself at times throughout

the years, that the mind is part of the brain: then why did he say 'Let me put it that . . .'? What was his intention? And anyhow, Ronald would think, I can manage. And anyhow, I might never have been able to follow and rise to the top of a normal career. What is a normal career? The law: closed to me; – but, his friends had said, you need not put in for Lord Chancellor, you could be a successful solicitor. Oh, could I? – You haven't seen me in a fit. The Civil Service: closed to me. No, not at all, said his advisers. Medicine, teaching, get yourself into a college, try for a fellowship, you've got the academic ability – you know what some of the dons are like, there wouldn't be anything odd . . .

'I could never be first-rate.'

'Oh, first-rate . . .'

He had been twenty-three, a post-graduate, when the fits started, without warning, three months after he had turned his attention to theology. The priesthood: closed to me. Yes, said his friends, that's out; and, said his theological counsellors, it never would have been any good in any case, you never had a vocation.

'How do you know?'

'Because, in the event, you can't be a priest.'

'That's the sort of retrospective logic that makes us Catholics distrusted.'

'A vocation to the priesthood is the will of God. Nothing can change God's will. You are an epileptic. No epileptic can be a priest. *Ergo* you never had a vocation. But you can do something else.'

'I could never be first-rate.'

'That is sheer vanity' – it was an old priest speaking – 'you were never meant to be a first-rate careerist.'

'Only a first-rate epileptic?'

'Indeed, yes. Quite seriously, yes,' the old priest said.

It was at a time when he was having convulsions three times a week that he had allowed himself to be taken by an itinerant specialist to a research centre in California, with the purpose of submitting to a two years' clinical trial of a new drug. He was one of sixty volunteers from five to twenty-eight years old. Ronald lived in a huge sun-balconied hostel. Some of the other fifty-nine were mentally deficient. Most were neurotic. None was highly intelligent. Of the total sixty patients three failed to respond to the drug, and of these Ronald was one. Of these three, Ronald succumbed to the dreaded *status epilepticus*, enduring fit after fit, one after the other in rapid succession, only four days after the treatment had started.

'This is due to emotional apprehension,' Dr Fleischer told him when, after a week, he lay partially recovered, thin and exhausted, in a cool green-and-white room with the sun-blinds down. 'You may withdraw from the experiment if you wish,' Dr Fleischer said. 'Or you may continue with profit.' Dr Fleischer's time and mind were largely occupied with the fifty-seven epileptics who had already begun to respond favourably to the new drug.

When Ronald was up and shakily walking about, drowsy from the effects of his usual drugs, he weighed up for himself the price of his possible cure. The patients who were responding to Dr Fleischer's treatment were all around him, they seemed even sleepier, drowsier than he – but, thought Ronald, this is not far from their normal condition, they were born half-awake.

'The new drug is successful,' the smart fresh-lipsticked young research woman told him. 'The drug has been found to have anti-convulsant and sedative effects on rats, and now it looks like being successful with the majority of patients here.' She smiled through her rimless spectacles with eyes far away, on the job, efficient, creamy-complexioned, first-rate.

'Well, your drug makes me worse,' Ronald said, feeling within himself, at that moment, the potentialities of a most unpleasant young man.

When he got the chance of another brief interview with Dr Fleischer he said, 'Do you understand what you are asking me to do when you urge me to persevere? I may have to undergo the repetitive fits again.'

Dr Fleischer said, 'I am not urging you to persevere. I suggest your failure to respond to the drug is caused only by emotional resistance.'

'Do you realise,' said Ronald, 'how long the few seconds of lucidity between the fits appears to be, and what goes on in one's mind in those few waking seconds?'

'No,' said the doctor, 'I don't realise what these lucid intervals are like. I recommend you to return to England. I recommend . . . I advise . . . No, there is no reason why your intellect should be impaired, except of course that you cannot exercise it to the full extent that would be possible were you able to follow and rise to the top of a normal career . . .'

'Perhaps,' Ronald said, 'I'll be a first-rate epileptic and that will be my career.'

Dr Fleischer did not smile. He reached for Ronald's index card and wrote upon it.

Before he departed Ronald's brain was tested by a machine that was now familiar to him, and which recorded the electric currents generated by his convulsions and which was beginning to be used in the criminal courts of some American States to ascertain the truth of a suspect's statement, so that it was popularly called 'the truth machine'.

While he was awaiting the convenience of the man who was to escort him back to England, Ronald deliberately ignored the scene around him. His fellow-patients, week by

week, busied themselves with tennis, bed-making, toy-making, and their jazz orchestra. It was only much later that these scenes, which he had made an effort not to notice, returned to Ronald again and again accompanied by Dr Fleischer's words – long after the specialist must have forgotten them – and mostly at the moments when Ronald, bored by his self-preoccupation, most wished to forget himself, clinics, hospitals, doctors, and all the pompous trappings of his malady. It was at these moments of rejection that the obsessive images of his early epileptic years bore down upon him and he felt himself to be, not the amiable Johnnie he had by then, for the sake of sheer goodwill and protection from the world, affected to be – but as one possessed by a demon, judged by the probing inquisitors of life an unsatisfactory clinic-rat which failed to respond to the right drug. In the course of time this experience sharpened his wits, and privately looking round at his world of acquaintances, he became, at certain tense moments, a truth-machine, under which his friends took on the aspect of demon-hypocrites. But being a reasonable man, he allowed these moods to pass over him, and in reality he rather liked his friends, and gave them his best advice when, in the following years, they began to ask him for it.

On his return from California he was surprised to find himself able in some measure to retain consciousness during his fits, although he could not control them, by a secret, inarticulate method which, whenever he tried to describe it to his doctors, began to fail him when next he practised it.

'I find it useful to induce within myself a sense,' Ronald at first told his doctor, '– when I am going under – a sense that every action in the world is temporarily arrested for the duration of my fit –'

'Seizure,' said the doctor.

'My seizure,' said Ronald, 'and this curiously enables me to retain some sort of consciousness during even the worst part. I find it easier to endure this partial consciousness of my behaviour during the fits than surrender my senses entirely, although it's a painful experience.'

Immediately he had said it, he felt foolish, he knew his explanation was inadequate. The doctor remarked, 'It's as I've said. There is always an improvement in the patient when he becomes used to his seizures. First he experiences the aura, and this enables him to take preliminary precautions as to his physical safety during the seizure. He learns to lie down on the floor in time. He learns . . .'

'No, that's not what I mean,' Ronald said. 'What I mean is something different. It is like being partly an onlooker during the fit, yet not quite . . .'

'The seizure,' said the doctor, meanwhile puzzling his brains with a frown.

'The seizure,' said Ronald.

'Oh, quite,' said the doctor. 'The patient might learn to exercise some control during the *petit-mal* stage to stand him in good stead during the *grand-mal* convulsions.'

'That's right,' Ronald said, and went home and, on the way, had a severe fit in the street; on which occasion his method would not work, so that he came to his senses in the casualty department of St George's Hospital, sick with inhalations which had been administered to him to arrest his frenzy.

Soon Ronald was obliged to earn his living. His father, a retired horticulturist, still mourning the early death of his wife, took fright when he realised that Ronald was incurable. Ronald reassured him, advised him to buy an annuity and go to live at Kew; the father smiled and went.

Ronald got a job in a small museum of graphology in the City, to which people of various professions had recourse as

well as curious members of the public. To Ronald's museum came criminologists from abroad, people wishing to identify the dates of manuscripts, or the handwriting attached to documents of doubt. Some came in the hope of obtaining 'readings' by which they meant a pronouncement as to the character and future fortunes of the person responsible for a piece of handwriting, but these were sent empty away. Ronald gained a reputation in the detection of forgeries, and after about five years was occasionally consulted by lawyers and criminal authorities, and several times was called to court as witness for the defence or prosecution.

At the museum he had a room to himself, with an understanding that he could there have his fits in peace without anyone fussing along to his aid. He knew how to compose himself for a fit. He cultivated his secret method of retaining some self-awareness during his convulsions, and never mentioned this to his doctors again, lest he should lose the gift. He kept by him a wedge of cork which he stuck between his teeth as the first signs seized him. He knew how many seconds it took to turn off the gas fire in his small office, to take the correct dose of his pills, to lie flat on his back, turn his head to the side, biting his cork wedge, and to await the onslaught. It was arranged, at these times, that no one entering Ronald's office should touch him except in the event of blood issuing from his mouth. Blood was never seen at his mouth, only foam, for Ronald was careful with his cork wedge. His two old colleagues and the two young clerks got used to him, and the typist, a large religious woman, ceased to try to mother him.

After five years Ronald's fits occurred on an average of once a month. The drugs which he took regularly, and in extra strength at the first intimations of his fits, became gradually more effective in controlling his movements, but

less frequently could he ward off the violent stage of his attack until he found a convenient place in which to lie down. Twice within fourteen years he was arrested for drunkenness while staggering along the street towards a chemist's shop. Twice, he simply lay down on the pavement close in to the walls and allowed himself to be removed by ambulance. As often as possible he travelled by taxi or by a lift in a friend's car.

The porter of his flats had once found him, curled up and kicking violently, in the lift, and Ronald had subsequently gone over the usual explanations in patient parrot-like sequence. And, on these out-of-doors occasions, wherever they might take place, Ronald would go home to bed and sleep for twelve to fourteen hours at a stretch. But in latter years most of his fits occurred at home, in his room, in his one-roomed flat in the Old Brompton Road; so that his friends came to believe that he suffered less frequently than he actually did.

Ronald had settled down to be an amiable fellow with a gangling appearance, slightly hunched shoulders, slightly neglected-looking teeth, and hair going prematurely grey.

'You could marry,' said his doctor.

'I couldn't,' Ronald said.

'You could have children. Direct inheritance is very rare. The risk is very slight. You could marry. In fact, you ought –'

'I couldn't,' Ronald said.

'Wait till you meet the right girl. The right girl can be very wonderful, very understanding, when a fellow has a disability like yours. It's a question of meeting the right girl.'

Ronald had met the right girl five years after his return from America. Her wonderful understanding of his fits terrified him as much as her beauty moved him. She was the

English-born daughter of German refugees. She was brown, healthy, shining, still in her teens and splendidly built. For two years she washed his socks and darned them, counted his laundry, did his Saturday shopping, went abroad with him, slept with him, went to the theatre with him.

'I'm perfectly capable of getting the theatre tickets,' he said.

'Don't worry, darling, I'll get them in the lunch hour,' she said.

'Look, Hildegarde, it isn't necessary for you to mother me. I'm not an imbecile.'

'I know, darling. You're a genius.'

But in any case the trouble between them had to do with handwriting. Hildegarde had taken to studying the subject, the better to understand the graphologist in her lover. Hildegarde took a short course, amazingly soaking up, by sheer power of memory, the sort of facts which Ronald had no ability to memorise and which in any case, if he was called upon to employ them, he would have felt obliged to look up in reference books.

Thus equipped, Hildegarde frequently aired her facts, her dates, her documentary references.

'You have a better memory than mine,' Ronald said one Sunday morning when they were slopping about in their bedroom slippers in Ronald's room.

'I shall be able to memorise for both of us,' she said.

And that very afternoon she said, 'Have you ever had ear trouble?'

'Ear trouble?'

'Yes, trouble with your ears?'

'Only as a child,' he said. 'Earache.'

She was by his desk, looking down at some handwritten notes of his.

'The formation of your capital "I's" denotes ear trouble,' she said. 'There are signs, too, in the variations of the angles that you like to have your own way, probably as the result of your mother's early death and the insufficiency of your father's interest in you. The emotional rhythm is irregular, which means that your behaviour is sometimes incomprehensible to those around you.' She laughed up at him. 'And most of all, your handwriting shows that you're a sort of *genius*.'

'Where did you get all this?' Ronald said.

'I've read some text-books. There must be something in it – it's a branch of graphology, after all.'

'Have you practised interpreting various people's characters from their handwriting, and tested the results against experience?'

'No, not yet. I've only just read the books. I memorised everything.'

'Your memory is better than mine,' Ronald said.

'I'll be able to remember for us both.'

And he thought, when we're married, she'll do everything for both of us. So that, when he remonstrated against her obtaining the theatre tickets, and told her he could perfectly well get them – 'I'm not an imbecile' – and she replied, 'I know, darling, you're a genius' – he decided to end the affair with this admirable woman. For it was an indulgent and motherly tone of voice which told him he was a genius, and he saw himself being cooked for, bought for, thought for, provided for, and overwhelmed by her in the years to come. He saw, as in a vision, himself coming round from his animal frenzy, his limbs still jerking and the froth on his lips – and her shining brown eyes upon him, her well-formed lips repeating as he woke such loving patronising lies as: 'You'll be all right, darling. It's just that you're a genius.' Which

would indicate, not her belief about his mental capacity but her secret belief in the superiority of her own.

After the affair had ended Ronald took to testing his memory lest it was failing him as a result of his disease. On the Saturday morning when the small thin man, Patrick Seton, had been pointed out to him in the café as one who was coming up for committal on Tuesday, Ronald, having faintly felt a passing sense of recognition, and left the café, and gone home, began once more to think of the man. But Ronald could not recall him or anything to do with him. He wished he had asked Martin Bowles the man's name. In a vexed way, Ronald sorted out his groceries, chucking them into their places in the cupboard. Then he went across to the pub.

There, drinking dark stout, were white-haired, dark-faced Walter Prett, art-critic, who was looking at a diet sheet, Matthew Finch, with his colourful smile, and black curly hair, London correspondent of the *Irish Echo*, and Ewart Thornton, the dark, deep-voiced grammar-school master who was a Spiritualist. These were bachelors of varying degrees of confirmation.

Ronald was actually forbidden alcohol, but he had found that the small quantity which he liked to drink made no difference to his epilepsy, and that the very act of ordering a drink gave him a liberated feeling.

He took his beer, sat down at his friends' table, and soundlessly sipped. In nearly five minutes' time he said, 'Nice to see you all here.'

Matthew Finch ran a finger through his black curls. Sometimes a desire came over Ronald to run his fingers through Matthew's black curls, but he had given up wondering if he were a latent homosexual, merely on the evidence of this one urge. Once he had seen a married couple rumple Matthew's hair in a united spontaneous gesture.

'Nice to see you all together,' Ronald said.

'Eggs, boiled or poached only,' Walter Prett read out in a sad voice from his diet sheet. 'Sour pickles but not sweet pickles. *No* barley, rice, macaroni –' he read quietly, then his voice became louder, and even Ronald, who was used to Walter Prett's changing tones, was startled by this. 'Fresh fruit of any kind, including bananas, also water-packed canned fruits,' Walter remarked modestly. 'No butter,' he shrieked, 'no fat or oil,' he roared.

'I've got mounds of homework,' said Ewart Thornton, 'because the half-term tests have begun.'

Matthew went over to the bar and brought back two pickled onions on a plate, and ate them.