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The Stranger's Child

Written by Alan Hollinghurst

Published by Picador

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Alan Hollinghurst

THE STRANGER'S CHILD

PICADOR



First published 2011 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-48324-7 HB
ISBN 978-0-330-51396-8 TPB

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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MICK IMLAH

1956—2009

Author's note

I am very grateful to the Belgian literary organization Het Beschrijf for a month's residency in the Passa Porta writers' apartment in Brussels, where part of this novel was written.

ONE

‘Two Acres’

1

She'd been lying in the hammock reading poetry for over an hour. It wasn't easy: she was thinking all the while about George coming back with Cecil, and she kept sliding down, in small half-willing surrenders, till she was in a heap, with the book held tiringly above her face. Now the light was going, and the words began to hide among themselves on the page. She wanted to get a look at Cecil, to drink him in for a minute before he saw her, and was introduced, and asked her what she was reading. But he must have missed his train, or at least his connection: she saw him pacing the long platform at Harrow and Wealdstone, and rather regretting he'd come. Five minutes later, as the sunset sky turned pink above the rockery, it began to seem possible that something worse had happened. With sudden grave excitement she pictured the arrival of a telegram, and the news being passed round; imagined weeping pretty wildly; then saw herself describing the occasion to someone, many years later, though still without quite deciding what the news had been.

In the sitting-room the lamps were being lit, and through the open window she could hear her mother talking to Mrs Kalbeck, who had come to tea, and who tended to stay, having no one to get back for. The glow across the path made the garden suddenly lonelier. Daphne slipped out of the hammock, put on her shoes, and forgot about her books. She started towards the house, but something in the time of day held her, with its hint of a mystery she had so far overlooked: it drew

her down the lawn, past the rockery, where the pond that reflected the trees in silhouette had grown as deep as the white sky. It was the long still moment when the hedges and borders turned dusky and vague, but anything she looked at closely, a rose, a begonia, a glossy laurel leaf, seemed to give itself back to the day with a secret throb of colour.

She heard a faint familiar sound, the knock of the broken gate against the post at the bottom of the garden; and then an unfamiliar voice, with an edge to it, and then George's laugh. He must have brought Cecil the other way, through the Priory and the woods. Daphne ran up the narrow half-hidden steps in the rockery and from the top she could just make them out in the spinney below. She couldn't really hear what they were saying, but she was disconcerted by Cecil's voice; it seemed so quickly and decisively to take control of their garden and their house and the whole of the coming weekend. It was an excitable voice that seemed to say it didn't care who heard it, but in its tone there was also something mocking and superior. She looked back at the house, the dark mass of the roof and the chimney-stacks against the sky, the lamp-lit windows under low eaves, and thought about Monday, and the life they would pick up again very readily after Cecil had gone.

Under the trees the dusk was deeper, and their little wood seemed interestingly larger. The boys were dawdling, for all Cecil's note of impatience. Their pale clothes, the rim of George's boater, caught the failing light as they moved slowly between the birch-trunks, but their faces were hard to make out. George had stopped and was poking at something with his foot, Cecil, taller, standing close beside him, as if to share his view of it. She went cautiously towards them, and it took her a moment to realize that they were quite unaware of her; she stood still, smiling awkwardly, let out an anxious gasp, and then, mystified and excited, began to explore her position. She knew that Cecil was a guest and too grown-up to play a trick

on, though George was surely in her power. But having the power, she couldn't think what to do with it. Now Cecil had his hand on George's shoulder, as if consoling him, though he was laughing too, more quietly than before; the curves of their two hats nudged and overlapped. She thought there was something nice in Cecil's laugh, after all, a little whinny of good fun, even if, as so often, she was not included in the joke. Then Cecil raised his head and saw her and said, 'Oh, hello!' as if they'd already met several times and enjoyed it.

George was confused for a second, peered at her as he quickly buttoned his jacket, and said, 'Cecil missed his train,' rather sharply.

'Well, clearly,' said Daphne, who chose a certain dryness of tone against the constant queasy likelihood of being teased.

'And then of course I had to see Middlesex,' said Cecil, coming forward and shaking her hand. 'We seem to have tramped over much of the county.'

'He brought you the country way,' said Daphne. 'There's the country way, and the suburban way, which doesn't create such a fine impression. You just go straight up Stanmore Hill.'

George wheezed with embarrassment, and also a kind of relief. 'There, Cess, you've met my sister.'

Cecil's hand, hot and hard, was still gripping hers, in a frank, convivial way. It was a large hand, and somehow unfeeling; a hand more used to gripping oars and ropes than the slender fingers of sixteen-year-old girls. She took in his smell, of sweat and grass, the sourness of his breath. When she started to pull her fingers out, he squeezed again, for a second or two, before releasing her. She didn't like the sensation, but in the minute that followed she found that her hand held the memory of his hand, and half-wanted to reach out through the shadows and touch it again.

'I was reading poetry,' she said, 'but I'm afraid it grew too dark to see.'

'Ah!' said Cecil, with his quick high laugh, that was almost a snigger; but she sensed he was looking at her kindly. In the late dusk they had to peer closely to be sure of each other's expressions; it made them seem particularly interested in each other. 'Which poet?'

She had Tennyson's poems, and also the *Granta*, with three of Cecil's own poems in it, 'Corley', 'Dawn at Corley' and 'Corley: Dusk'. She said, 'Oh, Alfred, Lord Tennyson.'

Cecil nodded slowly and seemed amused by searching for the kind and lively thing to say. 'Do you find he still holds up?' he said.

'Oh yes,' said Daphne firmly, and then wondered if she'd understood the question. She glanced between the lines of trees, but with a sense of other shadowy perspectives, the kind of Cambridge talk that George often treated them to, where things were insisted on that couldn't possibly be meant. It was a refinement of teasing, where you were never told why your answer was wrong. 'We all love Tennyson here,' she said, 'at "Two Acres".'

Now Cecil's eyes seemed very playful, under the broad peak of his cap. 'Then I can see we shall get on,' he said. 'Let's all read out our favourite poems – if you like to read aloud.'

'Oh yes!' said Daphne, excited already, though she'd never heard Hubert read out anything except a letter in *The Times* that he agreed with. 'Which *is* your favourite?' she said, with a moment's worry that she wouldn't have heard of it.

Cecil smiled at them both, savouring his power of choice, and said, 'Well, you'll find out when I read it to you.'

'I hope it's not "The Lady of Shalott",' said Daphne.

'Oh, I like "The Lady of Shalott".'

'I mean, that's my favourite,' said Daphne.

George said, 'Well, come up and meet Mother,' spreading his arms to shepherd them.

'And Mrs Kalbeck's here too,' said Daphne, 'by the way.'

'Then we'll try and get rid of her,' said George.

'Well, you can try . . .' said Daphne.

'I'm already feeling sorry for Mrs Kalbeck,' said Cecil, 'whoever she may be.'

'She's a big black beetle,' said George, 'who took Mother to Germany last year, and hasn't let go of her since.'

'She's a German widow,' said Daphne, with a note of sad realism and a pitying shake of the head. She found Cecil had spread his arms too and, hardly thinking, she did the same; for a moment they seemed united in a lightly rebellious pact.

2

While the maid was removing the tea-things, Freda Sawle stood up and wandered between the small tables and numerous little armchairs to the open window. A few high streaks of cloud glowed pink above the rockery, and the garden itself was stilled in the first grey of the twilight. It was a time of day that played uncomfortably on her feelings. 'I suppose my child is straining her eyes out there somewhere,' she said, turning back to the warmer light of the room.

'If she has her poetry books,' said Clara Kalbeck.

'She's been studying some of Cecil Valance's poems. She says they are very fine, but not so good as Swinburne or Lord Tennyson.'

'Swinburne . . .' said Mrs Kalbeck, with a wary chuckle.

'All the poems of Cecil's that I've seen have been about his own house. Though George says he has others, of more general interest.'

'I feel I know a good deal about Cecil Valance's house,'

said Clara, with the slight asperity that gave even her nicest remarks an air of sarcasm.

Freda paced the short distance to the musical end of the room, the embrasure with the piano and the dark cabinet of the gramophone. George himself had turned rather critical of 'Two Acres' since his visit to Corley Court. He said it had a way of 'resolving itself into nooks'. This nook had its own little window, and was spanned by a broad oak beam. 'They're very late,' said Freda; 'though George says Cecil is hopeless about time.'

Clara looked tolerantly at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'I think perhaps they are rambling around.'

'Oh, who knows what George is doing with him!' said Freda, and frowned at her own sharp tone.

'He may have lost his connection at Harrow and Wealdstone,' said Clara.

'Quite so,' said Freda; and for a moment the two names, with the pinched vowels, the throaty *r*, the blurred *W* that was almost an *F*, struck her as a tiny emblem of her friend's claim on England, and Stanmore, and her. She stopped to make adjustments to the framed photographs that stood in an expectant half-circle on a small round table. Dear Frank, in a studio setting, with his hand on another small round table. Hubert in a rowing-boat and George on a pony. She pushed the two of them apart, to give Daphne more prominence. Often she was glad of Clara's company, and her unselfconscious willingness to sit, for long hours at a time. She was no less good a friend for being a pitiful one. Freda had three children, the telephone, and an upstairs bathroom; Clara had none of these amenities, and it was hard to begrudge her when she laboured up the hill from damp little 'Lorelei' in search of talk. Tonight, though, with dinner raising tensions in the kitchen, her staying-put showed a certain insensitivity.

'One can see George is so happy to be having his friend,' said Clara.

'I know,' said Freda, sitting down again with a sudden return of patience. 'And of course I'm happy too. Before, he never seemed to have anybody.'

'Perhaps losing a father made him shy,' said Clara. 'He wanted only to be with you.'

'Mm, you may be right,' said Freda, piqued by Clara's wisdom, and touched at the same time by the thought of George's devotion. 'But he's certainly changing now. I can see it in his walk. And he whistles a great deal, which usually shows that a man's looking forward to something . . . Of course he loves Cambridge. He loves the life of ideas.' She saw the paths across and around the courts of the colleges as ideas, with the young men following them, through archways, and up staircases. Beyond were the gardens and river-banks, the hazy dazzle of social freedom, where George and his friends stretched out on the grass, or slipped by in punts. She said cautiously, 'You know he has been elected to the Conversazione Society.'

'Indeed . . .' said Clara, with a vague shake of the head.

'We're not allowed to know about it. But it's philosophy, I think. Cecil Valance got him into it. They discuss ideas. I think George said they discuss, "Does this hearth-rug exist?" That kind of thing.'

'The big questions,' said Clara.

Freda laughed guiltily and said, 'I understand it's a great honour to be a member.'

'And Cecil is older than George,' said Clara.

'I believe two or three years older, and already quite an expert on some aspect of the Indian Mutiny. Apparently he hopes to be a Fellow of the college.'

'He is offering to help George.'

'Well, I think they're great friends!'

Clara let a moment pass. 'Whatever the reason,' she said, 'George is blooming.'

Freda smiled firmly, as she took up her friend's idea. 'I know,' she said. 'He's coming into bloom, at last!' The image was both beautiful and vaguely unsettling. Then Daphne was sticking her head through the window and shouting,

'They're here!' – sounding furious with them for not knowing.

'Ah, good,' said her mother, standing up again.

'Not a moment too soon,' said Clara Kalbeck, with a dry laugh, as if her own patience had been tried by the wait.

Daphne glanced quickly over her shoulder, before saying, 'He's extremely charming, you know, but he has a rather carrying voice.'

'And so have you, my dear,' said Freda. 'Now do go and bring him in.'

'I shall depart,' said Clara, quietly and gravely.

'Oh, nonsense,' said Freda, surrendering as she had suspected she would, and getting up and going into the hall. As it happened Hubert had just got home from work, and was standing at the front door in his bowler hat, almost throwing two brown suitcases into the house. He said,

'I brought these up with me in the van.'

'Oh, they must be Cecil's,' said Freda. 'Yes, "C. T. V.", look. Do be careful . . .' Her elder son was a well-built boy, with a surprisingly ruddy moustache, but she saw in a moment, in the light of her latest conversation, that he hadn't yet bloomed, and would surely be completely bald before he had had the chance. She said, 'And a most intriguing packet has come for you. Good evening, Hubert.'

'Good evening, Mother,' said Hubert, leaning over the cases to kiss her on the cheek. It was the little dry comedy of their relations, which somehow turned on the fact that Hubert

wasn't lightly amused, perhaps didn't even know there was anything comic about them. 'Is this it?' he said, picking up a small parcel wrapped in shiny red paper. 'It looks more like a lady's thing.'

'Well, so I had hoped,' said his mother, 'it's from Mappin's—' as behind her, where the garden door had stood open all day, the others were arriving: waiting a minute outside, in the soft light that spread across the path, George and Cecil arm in arm, gleaming against the dusk, and Daphne just behind, wide-eyed, with a part in the drama, the person who had found them. Freda had a momentary sense of Cecil leading George, rather than George presenting his friend; and Cecil himself, crossing the threshold in his pale linen clothes, with only his hat in his hand, seemed strangely unencumbered. He might have been coming in from his own garden.

3

Up in the spare bedroom, Jonah settled the first suitcase on the bed, and ran his hands over the smooth hard leather; in the centre of the lid the initials C. T. V. were stamped in faded gold. He shifted and sighed in his private quandary, alert to the sound of the guest in the house. They were making each other laugh, down below, and the noise came upstairs without the sense. He heard Cecil Valance's laugh, like a dog shut in a room, and pictured him again in the hall, in his cream-coloured jacket with grass stains on the elbows. He had lively dark eyes and high colour, as though he'd been running. Mr George had called him Cess – Jonah said it in a noiseless whisper as he traced the *C* with the tip of his finger. Then he stood up

straight, sprang the catches, and released the heady and authentic gentleman's smell: toilet water, starch, and the slowly fading reek of leather.

As a rule, Jonah only came upstairs to carry cases or shift a bed; and last winter, his first at 'Two Acres', he had brought the coals up for the fires. He was fifteen, short for his age, but strong; he chopped wood, ran errands, went up and down to the station in Horner's van. He was the boy, in all the useful senses of the word, but he had never 'valeted' before. George and Hubert seemed able to dress and undress by themselves, and Mustow, Mrs Sawle's maid, took down all the laundry. This morning, however, George had called him in after breakfast and told him to look after his friend Valance, who he said was used to any number of servants. At Corley Court he had a marvellous man called Wilkes, who had looked after George as well when he stayed there, and given him some good advice without appearing to do so. Jonah asked what sort of advice it had been, but George laughed and said, 'Just find out if he needs anything. Unpack his bags as soon as he comes, and, you know, arrange the contents convincingly.' This was the word, enormous but elusive, that Jonah had had on his mind all day, sometimes displaced by some other task, then gripping him again with a subtle horror.

Now he unbuckled straps and lifted tissue-paper with hesitant fingers. Though he needed help, he was glad he was alone. The case had been packed by some expert servant, by Wilkes himself perhaps, and seemed to Jonah to call for some similar skill in the unpacking. There was an evening suit with two waistcoats, one black and one fancy, and then under the tissue-paper three dress-shirts and a round leather box for the collars. Jonah saw himself in the wardrobe mirror as he carried the clothes across the room, and saw his shadow, from the lamp on the bedside table, go rearing across the slope of the ceiling. George said Wilkes had done a particular thing, which

was to take away all his loose change when he arrived and wash it for him. Jonah wondered how he was going to get the change off Cecil without asking for it or appearing to steal it. It occurred to him that George might possibly have been joking, but with George these days, as even Mrs Sawle had said, it was hard to tell.

In the second case there were clothes for cricket and swimming, and a number of soft, coloured shirts which Jonah thought were unusual. He spaced them out equally on the available shelves, like a display in a draper's. Then there was the body linen, fine as a lady's, the drawers ivory-coloured, vaguely shiny, catching on the roughness of his thumb before he stroked them flat again. He listened for a moment for the tone of the talk downstairs, then took the chance he had been given to unfold a pair and hold them up against his round young face so that the light glowed through them. The pulse of excitement beating under his anxiety made the blood rush into his head.

The lid of the case was heavy; it had two wide pockets in it, closed with press-studs, and holding books and papers. Jonah took these out with a little more confidence, knowing from George that his guest was a writing man. He himself could write neatly, and could read almost anything, given the time. The handwriting, in the first book Jonah opened, was very bad, and ran uphill at an angle, with the *g*s and *y*s tangling the lines together. This appeared to be a diary. Another book, rubbed at the corners like the cash-book in the kitchen, had what must be poems in it. 'Oh do not smile on me if at the last' Jonah made out, the words quite large, but then after a few lines, where the crossing-out began, getting smaller and scratchier, sloping away across the page until they were crowded and climbing over each other in the bottom right-hand corner. There were dog-eared bits of paper tucked in, and an envelope addressed to 'Cecil Valance Esq[re], King's College'

in the careful writing which he knew at once to be George's. He heard rapid steps on the stairs and Cecil calling out, 'Hallo, which is my room?'

'In here, sir,' said Jonah, pushing the letter back and quickly squaring up the books on the table.

'Aha, are you my man?' said Cecil, suddenly possessing the room.

'Yes, I am, sir,' said Jonah, with a momentary sense of betrayal.

'I shan't need you much,' Cecil said, 'in fact you can leave me alone in the morning,' taking off his jacket at once and passing it to Jonah, who hung it up in the wardrobe without touching on the stained elbows. He planned to come back later, when they were having dinner, and deal with the dirty clothes unseen. He was going to be very much involved with all Cecil's things until Monday morning. 'Now, what shall I call you?' said Cecil, almost as if choosing from a list in his head.

'I'm Jonah, sir.'

'Jonah, eh . . . ?' The name sometimes led to remarks, and Jonah started rearranging the books on the table, unsure if they showed in some way that he'd looked inside them. After a moment Cecil said,'Now those are my poetry notebooks. You must make sure you never touch them.'

'Very well, sir,' said Jonah. 'Did you want them unpacked, then?'

'Yes, yes, that's all right,' said Cecil fair-mindedly. He tugged his tie off, and started unbuttoning his shirt. 'Been with the family long?'

'Since last Christmas, sir.'

Cecil smiled vaguely, as if he'd forgotten the question by the time it was answered, and said, 'Funny little room, isn't it.' Since Jonah didn't answer, he added, 'Rather charming, though, rather charming,' with his yap of a laugh. Jonah had the strange

feeling of being intimate with someone who was simultaneously unaware of him. In a way it was what you looked for, as a servant. But he had never been kept in talk in any of the other, smaller, bedrooms. He peered respectfully at the floor, feeling he mustn't be caught looking at Cecil's naked shoulders and chest. Now Cecil took out the change from his pocket and slapped it on the wash-stand; Jonah glanced at it and bit his cheek. 'And will you run me a bath,' said Cecil, undoing his belt and wriggling his hips to make his trousers fall down.

'Yes, sir,' said Jonah, 'at once, sir,' and slipped past him with a pang of relief.

4

Hubert forwent his bath that evening, and had what he felt was an unsatisfactory wash in his room. He wanted their guest to admire the house, and took some pleasure in hearing the tremendous splashes coming from next door; but he frowned as well, as he tied his tie in the mirror, at the virtual certainty that the sacrifice of his own half-hour in the tub would go unrecognized.

Having some time to spare, he went downstairs to the gloomy little room by the front door, which had been his father's office, and where Hubert too liked to write his letters. In truth he had very little private correspondence, and was dimly aware of not having the knack of it. When there was a letter to write, he did it with businesslike promptness. Now he sat down at the oak desk, fished his new gift from his dinner-jacket pocket, and laid it on the blotter with faint unease.

He took a sheet of headed paper from a drawer, dipped his pen in the pewter ink-well and wrote, in a rolling, backward-leaning hand:

> My dear old Harry –
>
> I can never thank you enough for the silver cigarette case. It's an absolute ripper, Harry old boy. I have told no one about it yet but will hand it round after dinner & just watch their faces! You are too generous, I'm sure no one ever had such a friend Harry. Well, it is nearly dinner-time, & we have a young friend of George's staying, a poet! You will meet him tomorrow, when you come over, he looks the part I must say though I have read not a word from his pen! Tons of thanks, Harry old boy, & best love from yours ever,
>
> Hubert.

Hubert turned the paper over on the blotter and thumped it tenderly with his fist. By writing large he had got the final few words on to the third side of the small folded sheet, which was a sign one hadn't merely written dutifully; the letter ran on pleasantly, and reading it over again he felt satisfied with the touches of humour. He tucked it into an envelope, wrote 'Harry Hewitt Esq., Mattocks, Harrow Weald' and 'By Hand' in the corner, and placed it on the tray in the hall for Jonah to take over in the morning. He stood looking at it for a moment, struck by the solemn rightness of living just here, and of Harry living where he did, and of letters passing between them with such noble efficiency.