
Opening Extract from...

All the Beggars Riding

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Published by Faber and Faber

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faber and faber

First published in this edition in 2013
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House,
74–77 Great Russell Street,
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd

Printed in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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

ISBN 978–0–571–27055–2

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Late May, a Thursday, the morning. Early morning, say six, or half six, but the sunlight is already pouring in, through the curtainless window set high in the slope of the roof, over the narrow bed and the sheets and the bare boards of the floor, flooding the room and everything in it, so that everything feels lit from inside. You are standing, face upturned to the window, breathing in the sun. I can see you, almost: if I close my eyes I can almost see you. A Thursday morning in May, 1972.

You've waited for this day, counting down each morning, as you wait for every second Thursday. Sometimes the waiting – delicious, unbearable – is almost better than the day itself, when it finally comes. The waiting, now, is like a bubble in your chest, and you are light and breathless with it.

You'll walk into work today, take the long way and go through Regent's Park. The flower-beds, the rose garden: they'll all look like they're laid out for you, especially, and today.

The weather has been unsettled lately, cloudless mornings turning into gusty skies and spatters of rain by mid-afternoon. You're going to go to the cinema – you decided this on the phone last night – a special screening at the Odeon on High Street Kensington of *Doctor Zhiv-*

ago. You haven't seen the film, and neither has he. Afterwards you'll dander (his word, your new favourite) back to Earl's Court, buy groceries on the way, a bottle of red wine, and you'll cook something simple. Extraordinary how even the simplest of things – the buying of eggs and tomatoes and cheese, the slicing of a lettuce, the pouring of wine into a glass – is transfigured by love. Love. The bubble swells in your chest. You haven't said it yet, neither of you, but maybe tonight he'll say: I love you, Jane. I love you.

The slight shadow that attempts to lace over the edges of things – your mind, the day – you push away.

It's a Thursday morning, an early Thursday morning, in May 1972, and you are poised on the edge of it, of everything. You walk over to the record player, propped on a crate in the corner, and put on a record: the B-side of Van Morrison's 'Come Running/Crazy Love'. You play it so quietly it's barely audible – the house is still and the others asleep – but you know the words inside out by now, after two weeks of playing them over and over, until they seem woven into the very fabric of you. Silently, inside, you sing along, and start to take the foam curlers from your hair. You slept in them, so that the curl would take, and when you unpin your hair after work the wave should still be there.

You wouldn't change anything, you suddenly think. You don't know where it comes from, or if it's an illusion, a trick of the sunlight and the music and a sleepless night, but you know, just know, that everything, in the end, is going to be fine.

THE CHERNOBYL EFFECT

The Chernobyl Effect

The Chernobyl Effect was the name of the documentary. It was what started things. Late one mid-week channel-crawling night.

It was one year after my mother died, almost to the date, and I had suddenly realised that I was an orphan now. 'Orphan': it sounds ridiculous to call yourself an orphan at the age of almost thirty-eight. But that evening, out of nowhere, it hit me – I felt it in my chest, like something physical – I was truly alone in the world.

My mother was ill for a long time before she died. She suffered from heart disease, which is a grim sort of irony: intrinsic cardiomyopathies, to give the condition its medical name. Unpredictable weaknesses in the muscle of the heart that are not due to an identifiable external cause. It's one of the leading indications for heart transplant, and indeed she should have, could have, been on the register for one, except that at every stage she point-blank refused. It was her heart, she said, over and over. She didn't want it ripped out of her – she was occasionally, surprisingly prone to melodrama like that, my mother – and she didn't want someone else's heart in her. The drugs they gave her to try and stabilise her, as her condition deteriorated, caused her much suffering and weakness and confusion, but still she wouldn't change her mind. She was stubborn as hell, my mother, when she set her mind

to something. She was young, too: only fifty-nine when she died. Sometimes it felt like one more thing she'd set her mind upon, although it wasn't as if she was religious, or believed in any grand reconciliation or redemption after death.

So, anyway, she'd died, and for the first few months things had been indescribably bad, even though we weren't particularly close. From the outside, I managed to look like a normal person: phoning the agency, getting my rota, seeing the patients, shopping, cooking, all the mundane rest of it. But inside I was alternately blank and lurching with grief, thick and oily, like waves, that would rise up and threaten to swamp me utterly. I won't try to describe it any more: I'll only sound histrionic. People kept saying, time will heal, and in a terrible, clichéd way, it does: every day life pastes its dull routines over the rawness, although the rawness is still there. Six months after, I'd begun to feel that I was surfacing; on a good day I might even be above the water, although of course without warning you can still be dragged back under. Then everything happened with Jeremy, and terrible as that was, it was sort of galvanising in the sense that some kind of survival mechanism kicked in and there was so much practical stuff to sort out – a bit like the immediate aftermath of a death – that I was on autopilot for a while.

I'm not explaining this very well: I'm getting everything jumbled up together. Which, in a way, is what it was; but that doesn't help the telling of it. I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I thought I'd come through the worst of it, when that night – two weeks ago now – I

came across that programme on the TV and everything changed.

The documentary was about the aftermath of those explosions that destroyed the fourth reactor at the nuclear power plant near Pripyat on the 26th of April 1986. I hadn't thought about it in years, but as soon as I saw those infamous, grainy satellite photos of the power plant matchsticked and smouldering, and the rubber trunk-nosed radiation suits, it all came back to me. Sitting cross-legged with Alfie on the brown shagpile rug through *Newsround* and then all of the other news bulletins we could find, right through to the *Nine O'Clock News* and BBC2's *Newsnight*, at which point our mother came home from work and made us switch off the television, saying it would give Alfie nightmares, which it did, of course: how could it not? The Soviet government was equivocating, and they were starting to detect radiation as far away – as near – as Glasgow. People on panel discussions were saying things like 'Is this the end of the world as we know it?'

Our world, that is, Alfie's and mine, and our mother's, had come to a sudden, messy and public end the autumn before. Sunday 24th November 1985: the date is seared in my memory. I was twelve, then, twelve and four months, and Alfie had just turned eight, when our father was killed – a freak accident, a helicopter crash in bad weather. Then came the revelations, and the reporters, and soon after that we had to move out of our home and into the grotty, ramshackle rooms on the North End Road. Unsurprisingly I had shut down: closed in on myself so

tightly that nothing got through, or touched me, until I saw those first shaky BBC images.

Within a millisecond or so of flicking to the channel, in less than the time it took me to realise what it was, this swirling, churning welter of things was set going inside of me. As if all the griefs in my life, my father, my mother, and to an extent Jeremy, as if I was mourning all of them: mourning myself and all my other selves.

I'm getting ahead of myself, I know, jumbling things up again. I do intend to come to things properly, in their own time, in at least approximately the right order. It's harder to tell a story, though, than you'd think. As I said earlier, lives aren't orderly, and nor is memory: the mind doesn't work like that. We make it so, when we narrate things – setting them in straight lines and in context – whereas in reality things are all mixed up, and you feel several things, even things that contradict each other, or that happened at separate times, or that aren't on the surface even related, all at once. So I need somehow to convey the sensation of chancing on this documentary, so late at night, when what I was probably searching for and expecting was something banal and mind-numbing, anaesthetic, like reruns of *Friends*. Seeing the Chernobyl footage, and understanding on my pulses what it was, and the surreal sensation of being there a year after my mother died and at the same time it being five months after my father had died: as if both things, both times, were happening at once. I'm really not explaining this very well. It was as if there was no distinction between times and they were all just overlaid on top of each other, the same things happening again and again on their little

loop in a hellish eternal present. And in that instant, I knew I had to do something: I was trapped and I needed to do something, change something, before it was too late.

If you've ever had a panic attack, you'll know what I mean. The feeling of everything happening at once, everything closing down on you, and in on you, and there being no way out, and worse than the physical is – and yes, this sounds over-the-top, too, but there's no other way of putting it – a creeping, almost existential, sense of doom.

The thing I just said, about separating strands out, and putting them in order, a beginning a middle and an end, and trying to understand them: that moment is when I decided – more than decided, *knew* – that that was what I needed to do, had to do. As if the telling of the story could somehow save me.

Perhaps things will make more sense once I have explained the documentary a little.

The Chernobyl Effect was made maybe ten years after the catastrophe. It consisted of a series of interviews with survivors from Pripyat and evacuees from the surrounding villages, and two doctors or scientists with deliberately distorted voices and blacked-out eyes. The doctors, or scientists, were the least interesting: they talked in solemn chains of statistics and made predictions about percentages and roentgens per hour. But the survivors – or 'victims' might be a better word, because there was nothing triumphant about them, no sense that they'd over-

come – they were twitching and palsied, clinging on to life by their flaking fingernails. Hardly any of the men spoke. It was the women who wanted to tell their stories. The women, with their craggy, sunken faces and teeth like pickled walnuts, looked like grandmothers – older than grandmothers, like ancient crones or hags from Belarusian folk stories. But most of them were no older than me, and some of them were five, six years younger. When the reactor exploded, they'd been nineteen, twenty-one, twenty-four. Newlyweds, young mothers, strong, healthy wives. Most of their menfolk worked at the plant, and they supplemented the wages by keeping chickens, and maybe a cow; by growing potatoes, cabbages, and a few rows of black radishes. The day of the explosions was a Friday. At about midday, word got around that there was a fire at the plant. As the sun set, they watched it in the distance, and it was wilder and more beautiful than you could ever imagine, they said, the flickering streams of colour and shining light, like something from an American movie. They piled outside to watch it, passed around bottles of the local spirit, let their children stay up way past their bedtime. The word had spread to villages further afield by this time, and family, friends came in cars or on bicycles to see the unearthly light and the showers of sparks – like fireworks, on an indescribable scale – holding their children on their shoulders so they too could see and remember. No one knew how dangerous it was. Even the next morning, when the streets filled with tanks and gas-masked soldiers, they weren't scared. It was reassuring, one woman said, to think that the might of the Army had come to

help them. They were to leave for a few days, the loudspeakers said, just as a precaution, so the scientists could do tests and the firemen could wash down the roads and buildings. They were to take with them essential documents only – identity cards and papers, marriage and birth certificates – and schoolchildren could bring their books, but that was all. Even now, the women said, no one was scared, or if they were, they were just beginning to be. They talked of leaving bread on the table, and spoons – old folks' superstitions, at their mother-in-law's or grandmother's insistence. If there is bread on the table, and a spoon for every soul in the house, then you can come back, and things will be as they were. Some of them – their stories started to fragment now – suspected that something was wrong, and they tried to smuggle out belongings by wearing three dresses over each other, wrapping their babies in extra blankets and hiding in the layers valuables like silver christening spoons, putting seed potatoes in their children's pockets and hoods. But the soldiers knew, and the soldiers stopped them. Some tried to bring their cats, or the best-laying hens, and were forced at gunpoint to abandon them. Children were crying by now, and some old babushkas were refusing to leave, accusing the government of trying to steal their cow, their goat, their silver, sitting down in the middle of the road or running into the forest, and the soldiers dragged them up and slung them into the army trucks like sacks of manure.

I'm going into too much detail. This was only the backdrop, so to speak: it isn't the important part, the part I need to tell. That part came next.

As the chorus of women started telling of the evacuation and subsequent days and weeks, the camp beds in school gymnasiums and allocation of rooms in damp tower blocks, the fear and rumours that bred from each other, especially once the sickness started, the nausea and vomiting and diarrhoea that affected most of them, but the children and infants worst, the blister packs of iodine tablets and half-gallons of milk distributed to each head of household, the hair loss and weight loss and ulcerated skin, the doctors who wore rubber suits and masks even when weighing and examining babies – as they spoke of these things, they grew visibly more upset until one by one they refused to talk any more. They got up and walked away or turned their faces from the camera, until the documentary cut to a picture of a graveyard and a voice-over began about mortality rates and radiation sickness in children.

Then a new story began. Compared to this story, the Pripyat survivors' tales paled. You understood they'd been – pardon the grotesque phrase, but this is what it seemed like – a sort of warm-up act.

The second story took the angle of the workers at the plant, the ones who'd been there on that Friday. Most if not all of them were dead, the voiceover intoned; they'd died within weeks. The documentary crew had been unable to track down many surviving relatives who were prepared to talk to a camera: the narrator hinted at obstruction by politicians, and veiled threats, and thwarted leads. This was, as he reminded us, little more than a decade after the incident. But they'd found one widow, Nastasya, they called her, although that wasn't her real

name. She sat in profile to the camera, so that most of her face was in shadow. Her black headscarf was tightly bound under her chin, and her voice, in the gaps between the translation, was low and rasping. On the day of the explosions, she was twenty-two, and she had been married for three months and seventeen days. I could tell you the hours, too, she said. I could tell you the minutes and the seconds, because we were newlyweds, and each hour and minute and second was a kind of wonder. We said *I love you* many times a day, and I think now that we didn't know what those words meant. Her husband was a worker at the plant, she said, and they lived in the dormitory with the other workers and wives, a seven-storey block about half a mile from Chernobyl. Their room was on the fourth floor, facing north, and when they heard the blasts they got up and went to the window – it was about half past one in the morning – and they could see the flames. Her husband, Aleksander, was working the early shift, from six to six, and she tried to persuade him to come back to bed, but he was already buttoning on his shirt and overalls and said that it was his duty to help, they had been drilled for this, she must go back to bed and keep all the windows closed.

The day passed, and he didn't come home, and she and the other wives watched the flames in the sky and could feel the heat of them. Then six o'clock passed, the time when his shift should have ended, had he been working a regular shift, and still nothing, and some of the wives were worried now because their husbands had been gone for twenty-four hours. Word went around that the fire was worse than expected and that men from the plant

had been taken to hospital. A group of wives set off for the hospital but the roads were cordoned off and the police weren't letting anyone through. Some women begged, and others tried to bribe the policemen, and in the confusion two of them got through, Nastasya and one other. The other woman had a brother-in-law who was an orderly at the hospital and he took the women to the ward and they saw their husbands – so red and swollen their mouths and eyes had vanished in their faces. While they were there, one of the men – there were about fifteen of them, she guessed, in that room anyhow – one of them vomited a great gush of blood and died. They knew then that the men had been poisoned: by gas, people were saying, by fumes from the smoke, and the orderly was yelling at them to get out, and saying that if they wanted to help they could bring milk. Milk? Yes, milk, the men needed milk, they needed to drink as much milk as possible, and the hospital couldn't provide it, or couldn't provide enough. So she and the other woman left and rushed to the nearest store and bought as much milk as they could carry: but by the time they got back to the hospital the crowd of people there – mainly wives and mothers of the hospitalised workers – had doubled, and the cordon had been strengthened, there were soldiers there by now, and military vehicles, and there was no way of getting through. People were yelling and shoving and clawing one another and wailing and the containers of milk got lost, trampled and split underfoot. A soldier announced through a megaphone that the Army was airlifting the men to hospital in Moscow, where there were better facilities and more doctors, and each man would need a

change of clothes and some food for the journey, strictly limited to one bag per patient, and would be allowed to see his wife or mother for five minutes when it was handed over. So all of the women rushed back to their dormitories or flats but by the time they came back with their bundle of clothes – their husband's or son's smartest suit and shoes, a clean shirt and necktie, because they weren't going to have their men looked down on in the city – and their string bag with a stoppered bottle of milk, a hunk of black bread and cheese, perhaps a hip flask of spirits, whatever they could lay their hands on: they realised that the Army had tricked them and the men were gone, loaded straight from their beds onto military aircraft, the orderlies said.

Can you even begin to imagine?

Not all of the women were able to follow their husbands and sons to Moscow. Many of them had babies or young children, elderly parents; many of them had never left their villages, were scared. But Nastasya went, and two others, pawning their gold rings and best shoes for the airfare.

In Moscow, it took two days of begging and bribing before they found out the name of the hospital – it was a special hospital, for radiology, on the outskirts of the city – and another day before they persuaded a receptionist to let them in. The head doctor wouldn't let them up at first – oh, the agony, knowing that their husbands were metres away from them – but eventually she relented and said they could have twenty minutes, but they must keep two metres away at all times; no touching, and certainly no kissing.

Nastasya laughed when she said this. How do you expect, she said, turning towards the camera for the first time, that a woman will stay two metres from her beloved and not kiss him? As for the twenty minutes: now that she had found him, her Aleksy, she wasn't going to leave him again, ever.

How do you find the strength to tell a story like that? How do you find the strength to live it?

Nastasya's voice grows harsh and proud as she tells of how she stayed near her husband. Many of the doctors and orderlies were mutinying, refusing to work the Chernobyl ward, or simply not turning up to work at all, scared of the clicking Geiger counters and the masks they were given to wear. So Nastasya and the other women took over the duties, carrying trays of food, emptying bedpans, and in this way they managed to stay close to their husbands. Each day, she said, there were more dead, and each day her Aleksander had died a little, too. If you spill boiling water or borscht or hot oil on your skin, or go too close to a normal flame, it burns from the outside in. But his body had been burned deep on the inside, a doctor explained, and as the burns came to the surface his skin peeled away in layers, first patches the size of a small coin, then saucers, and then sections the size of a plate, leaving lesions behind, raw flesh that smelled as if it was cooking. His teeth loosened and came out as he coughed or talked – he spat them in clumps of bone and gum into his hand. His hair rubbed off in handfuls as she stroked it. He was shitting blood and mucus twenty, thirty times a day, and parts of his intestines, coiled in on themselves, were coming out, too. His pupils

were like a dead rabbit's, swollen and glazed. The head doctor begged her to leave. He is no longer your husband, she said. He is a dangerous radioactive object. Go. Save yourself. It is what he would want, surely? But I couldn't go, she says. How could I go? How could I leave him? In his brief periods of sentience, he clutched at her hand and tried to form his mouth into the shape of her name. He knew who she was, he knew she was there: how could she leave him? In the last days, he was coughing up parts of his internal organs – chunks of liver, slimy and blackened – and she had to pluck them from his mouth with her fingers. No doctors by then would go near him.

She stops talking for a long moment.

When he died, she says, they wouldn't give me his body. They said it had to be buried in a lead-lined coffin, in a place far from anywhere anyone might ever go.

Will you find out? she says, turning straight towards the camera and interviewer. Will you find out where they have buried my husband, so I can lie beside him?

I have three different types of cancer, she says, but the cancers are not going to get me until I have found Aleksander Alexeivich.

At this point the off-camera interviewer asks her something, in a murmur.

And she turns again, straight to the camera, and says in broken, heavily accented English: Why I do it? If you need to ask this, then you are stupid, you are foolish old woman, and I would not trade my life and health for yours, even now. Why I do it? Because I love him, is why. Because is what love is.

I didn't see the end of it. Five minutes or so of summary, I imagine there must have been, to take it up to the end of the hour. I fumbled for the remote control and managed to switch it off, the screen closing over Nastasya's pale, twisted, transfigured face, and I sat there, trembling. Trembling is the right word: ripples of it were racing through and over my whole body. Something I hadn't known had been thickening in me up to that moment, until Nastasya and her Aleksander dragged it to the surface. It was the realisation that if my mother had watched Nastasya talking of her sweetheart, she would have understood. She would have had a level of pity or compassion or understanding or whatever the word might be that surpassed the gruesome, car-crash compulsion of the story. Because she loved my father. She would have done what Nastasya did, for him. In fact, in a way, what she did was exactly that. I suddenly remembered her saying, and it was as clearly as if she was right beside me, speaking the words again now, *I would do it all again, I wouldn't trade anything, not even the outcome, not even if I knew the outcome right from the start*. She'd said it after the funeral, when we were doorstepped, and it had been printed in the trashier papers, large, in capital letters. And I realised how much there was that I didn't understand, that I'd never asked, and never could ask now. Our mother rarely talked about our father: she kept him all shut up inside of her, as if in talking of him she'd disperse him, or leak her store of him away. Towards the end I tried to ask her, but she wouldn't answer; when she did talk, it was loose and rambling, and made little or no sense. I'd gone through her things after she died, and

even the shoeboxed scraps of memento she had – the odd photo or bus ticket, cinema stub or hospital wristband, cassette tape or electricity bill, old airline tickets from the days when you had actual tickets, postcards, perforated strips of negatives, a copy of Sylvia Plath's *Winter Trees* (she'd asked for that, in hospital, and we hadn't been able to find it, and only found it afterwards) – none of them meant anything, none of them told me anything about her, or about him. A lot of them, I couldn't work out if she'd kept out of sentiment or in a slow drift of accumulation, never getting round to throwing them away.

I have the boxes here, *Clarks* and *Dolcis* and one *Russell & Bromley*, stacked up beside the sofa, because I couldn't bring myself to throw them away, either.

It's almost unbearable, the feeling that you've never really known someone, after all, and that now your chance to know them is gone.

So that's what this is. On Tuesday 29th March 2011, I am beginning my attempt to tell my story, and set the past to rights and to rest, and to understand.

I suppose I'd better begin at the beginning. Perhaps I should have done that all along. Ignored this documentary, and its effect on things. Or summarised it more briefly. For one thing, it's gruesome using real people's lives, real people's deaths, to try and explain something of mine, I know. The scales of suffering are incomparable. All I can say is that even though I can't quite articulate why exactly it's important, I just know it is, crucially so. In my defence, I have tried not to linger, or to be gratuitous. If you ever watch it for yourself, you will see that:

you will see that it is hundreds of times more terrible and more harrowing in the flesh than in my words. But I am trying to be truthful – there's no point in doing any of this if I'm not truthful – and telling the truth, somehow getting to the truth, or towards it, is the only thing that seems to matter. For my life was a whole tissue of deception and lies.

The beginning, as you will see, was in many ways the ending of everything, too.