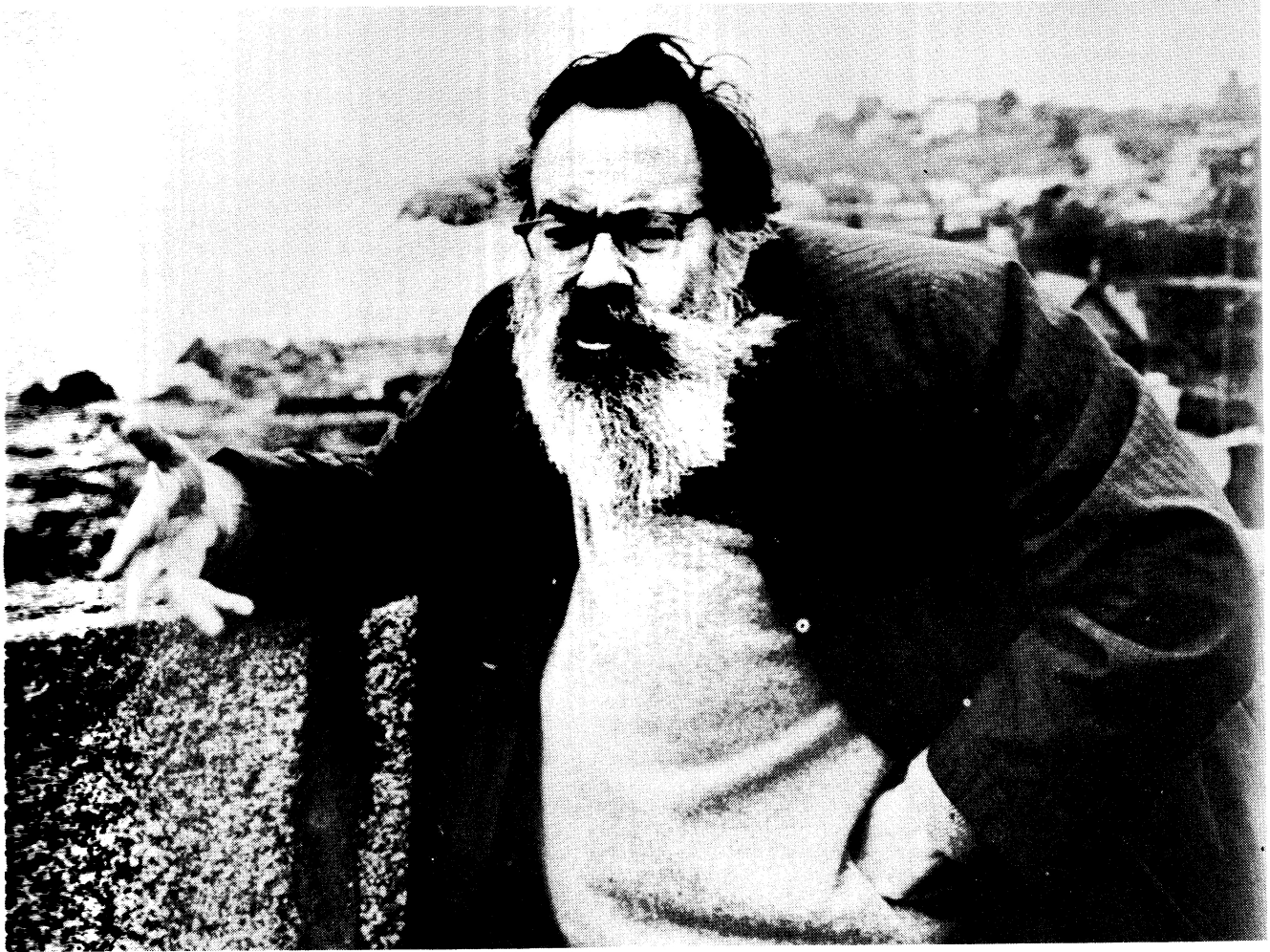


the new review



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Everything to Lose

HANS KELLER 3

Berryman in the Forties

JOHN HAFFENDEN 7

Three Poems

ZBIGNIEW HERBERT 16

Two Poems

TONY FLYNN 18

It's Disgusting at your Age

MARTIN AMIS 19

Starting Out

H. M. JACOBSON 25

The Soho Hospital for Women

FLEUR ADCOCK 37

Oh My Monsters!

JULIA O'FAOLAIN 39

Lorca

D. M. THOMAS 47

Two Poems

PAUL HYLAND 48

Soccer without a Ball

YURI BROKHIN 49

Letters 58

We're Having a Party

JOHN STURROCK 61

Reviews by

F. S. SCHWARZBACH,
DAVID CRAIG 62

TNRSPORT

Edited by
RUSSELL DAVIES 68

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Cartoons pp.68 and 70 by Russell Davies.

IT'S DISGUSTING AT YOUR AGE

MARTIN AMIS

Two young men, very early twenties, wearing jeans and plain shirts, sit at a table in a tidy though ill-equipped kitchen. They are educated, middle-class: JAMES, taller, prettier, weedier-looking; FREDDIE, stockier, more robust, but with the same puppyish air. JAMES sits erect with his hands palm-upwards on the table; FREDDIE lounges with his arms folded. Their talk is slightly stylised, having that defeated, ironic twang peculiar to their class and age-group.

JAMES I can't cope any more. She's started sending me obscene poems now. I can't cope with this.

FREDDIE What sort of obscene poems?

JAMES (*running the back of his hand haggardly across his forehead*) Stuff about my 'diamond crown'. And stuff about her 'amber jewel'.

FREDDIE What sort of stuff about them?

JAMES Just stuff like that about them.

FREDDIE How disgusting. Well what are you going to do about it, James?

JAMES That's just it. What can I do about it? I can't say — Look here, don't send me any more obscene poems, okay? . . . I just can't cope any more. And the horrible things she makes me do in bed — they're . . . She's insatiable, Freddie. Insatiable.

FREDDIE (*starts to look hunted himself, at which JAMES seems to perk up a little*) Felicity's exactly the

same. We should never have got mixed up with them. They're far too posh. Posh girls, they're after one thing and one thing only.

JAMES Your body.

FREDDIE Sex sex sex.

JAMES It's all they ever think about.

FREDDIE They're totally obsessed with it.

JAMES Totally.

FREDDIE Why couldn't we have taken up with two nice working-class girls?

JAMES I know.

Silence.

JAMES Tell you what — we were insane to give in on the first night like that. They don't respect you if you come across straightaway.

FREDDIE Exactly. They just use you.

JAMES Yeah, if only we had held out for a couple of weeks. Then they would have valued more what they were getting.

FREDDIE Trouble is, you do that nowadays and they just don't want to know. If you don't come across, they're off. There's plenty of others who will.

JAMES And they're so persistent. Won't take no for an answer.

FREDDIE They just nag until you do.

JAMES I mean, we have feelings, same as anyone else. We're not just lumps of flesh.

FREDDIE No use telling them that, oh no . . . Well it's got to stop. Tonight.

JAMES Mm. What's the time?

FREDDIE Mm. Better get changed I suppose.

Their faces go slack with foreboding. Then animate.

FREDDIE Bags the first bath.

JAMES Look. I've got to wash my hair.

FREDDIE Tough. I've got to wash mine.

JAMES You washed it yesterday.

FREDDIE No I didn't. Day before.

JAMES Yes you did. Anyway, you shouldn't wash it that often otherwise it'll go all . . .

They leave the kitchen, arguing contentedly.

Cut to a feminine bedroom. The tall and angular MIRANDA, in panties and bra, is trying to unscrew a jar of face-cream, her features contorted angrily. She grunts, and throws the jar with a clatter on to the dressing-table. FELICITY, broader and even more formidable-looking, strides in, violently shaking at some dress.

FELICITY What's up?

MIRANDA Bloody jar. Can't get the top off. (*Looks grimly into mirror.*) Guess I'll just have to go rugged tonight.

They start getting dressed, briskly, negligently.

FELICITY How are we going to work it?

MIRANDA I suppose we'll have to go through the motions first. It's only civilised. How about a film? Then at least we won't have to small talk.

FELICITY That's a point. I'm going to gag if I have to listen to Fred whining on about the art gallery.

MIRANDA Or James droning on about the death of the novel. You'd think he was married to the bloody thing.

FELICITY (*deliberately worsening her deb accent*) I don't know — the things a girl has to put up with these days.

MIRANDA (*also in shopgirl*) The sacrifices we have to make.

FELICITY Well, it's got to end. I can't take another night like the last.

MIRANDA Look, let's be half-an-hour late, then take them to that long Charles Bronson murder film at the Classic. Then it'll be too late for dinner and we can whisk them off straightaway.

FELICITY Your turn to go there. I'll get Freddie back here.

MIRANDA Say you want to show him those pictures for the gallery.

FELICITY But what if bloody James decides he wants to see them too?

MIRANDA I'll say I've got to get the book I left at their place.

FELICITY Right. And if they start moaning about not splitting up just bundle him off.

MIRANDA Got to be firm with them. Tonight, anyway.

FELICITY (*looks at her watch*) We've got ages. Let's have one on the way. Got a brush?

MIRANDA (*pokes dubiously among the rubble on the dressing-table*) It's . . . perhaps it's in the —

FELICITY To hell with it anyway.

Cut to JAMES, standing slightly arched backwards in front of a bedroom mirror, combing or brushing his hair with as much concentration and complexity as the actor's locks allow. FREDDIE's voice from neighbouring room.

FREDDIE James! Have you got my belt again?

JAMES (*looks startled*) Yes.

FREDDIE (*enters, elaborately clothed*) Well get it off.

JAMES Come on, Freddie. Please. I lent you the waistcoat.

FREDDIE Get it off.

JAMES (*despondently does so*) Well let me wear the blue scarf.

FREDDIE No.

JAMES Come on.

FREDDIE All right. If I can have the hat.

JAMES I wanted that.

FREDDIE No scarf then.

JAMES (*agonised decision*) Oh okay. But I wear the belt next time.

FREDDIE Oh all right. Christ, James, you're like a bloody girl sometimes. Like a bloody girl. (*Straightens the lapels of his velvet jacket.*) Well how do I look?

JAMES Bit of shaving cream on your chin.

FREDDIE wipes it off. JAMES folds his arms, leans back, and stares at FREDDIE for at least five seconds.

JAMES Mm, well, I was never sure about that shirt, as you know. I mean, those cuffs . . . And the jacket's all gone to hell under the arms of course. But all right on the whole. (*Posture relaxes.*) Apart from those revolting boots. And me?

FREDDIE . . . Well, the colour-scheme isn't one I would have chosen, but you can get used to anything in time I

suppose. The shape is good. (*Leans forward and arranges a curl of James's hair.*) The effect, the general effect is good, even though the details are all out of whack. Mmm — wish I had your complexion.

JAMES Ah shut up. Bitch bitch bitch. At least I haven't got dishcloth hair. I mean, look at it, Freddie. You can't do a thing with it, can you? You can't, can you?

FREDDIE Ah shut up. I just don't happen to need to arrange my hair to cover my face, like some sort of veil. Do something about it, James, please. Just cope with it. You ought to try this new cream they've come up with. Apparently it —

JAMES Ah shut up. And look, what are we going to do?

FREDDIE Relax. I've got it all worked out. We've been pushed around for long enough.

JAMES Treated like dirt.

FREDDIE Like scum. Well it's going to be different tonight. Is there any Campari left? We'd better get Dutched.

JAMES It goes straight to your paunch, you know.

FREDDIE Ah shut up.

Cut to public house. FELICITY and MIRANDA are leaning virilely against the bar, half-full pint glasses of beer in front of them, chain smoking. Their voices are raised in the normal oblivious upper-class style.

FELICITY I always used to wonder whether it was worth all the sweat. Getting dressed up. The dinner. The smalltalk.

MIRANDA Going through the motions.

FELICITY I like to take it easy on my evenings out.

MIRANDA It's all too much like hard work.

FELICITY Still, it's good exercise. Keeps us in shape.

MIRANDA What's Freddie really like then?

FELICITY (*expression grows slightly wistful*) Well, Freddie's . . . He's got a funny figure really. He's a bit short in the shank — that's why he wears those yob's boots. But he's got a good back and nice shoulders. And his —

MIRANDA But what's he really like?

FELICITY (*realises she has misunderstood*) Oh, Well, he was a bit nervous and shy at first, of course. Romantics always are. Lots of stupid inhibitions. Completely green, really. For instance he wouldn't even . . .

* * *

Fade dreamily to two discotheque alcoves, the boys in one, the girls in the other, a glass screen between them. The discotheque to be done as uncornily as possible. We don't need to see anything but the alcoves, so we can get away with lights flashing off-camera and background music. Centre on boys:

FREDDIE I don't know why the hell we still come here. I don't know the hell why we still do.

JAMES It's so tacky. Look at that dirty fool in the orange bell-bottoms.

FREDDIE Bell-bottoms. I mean, really, I ask you.

JAMES His hair's a total mess. A write-off. God, I loathe people who dance like that. As if he's covered in lice.

FREDDIE He probably is. At least he's an improve-

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ment on that fashionable Chink. What is it with you Chinese these days? What makes you think you're so flash?

JAMES Mm. Wonder where he got that jersey, though. Think it's cashmere?

FREDDIE . . . No. Cashmere gives off a kind of —

JAMES (*freezes with a glass at his lips*) Oh God. That girl's giving me the eye.

FREDDIE (*equally alarmed*) Which one?

JAMES (*out of the corner of his mouth*) Next door. The blonde.

FREDDIE (*out of the corner of his mouth*) Well just pretend not to notice.

Move over to MIRANDA and FELICITY.

MIRANDA What about them?

FELICITY (*looks interested but unimpressed*) Mm. Which one do you fancy?

MIRANDA I'm not fussy.

FELICITY You can't afford to be in this dump. (*Looks around wearily.*) There were a couple of half-way decent Greek-type efforts over by the door just now but I think they've already been pulled.

MIRANDA Yes, they were all right. Looks like these two then.

FELICITY Looks like it.

MIRANDA It's your turn, isn't it?

FELICITY Yours, I think.

MIRANDA Okay.

FELICITY No, I'll do it.

Back to JAMES and FREDDIE.

JAMES Yawn. They're coming over. I think they're coming over.

FREDDIE Yawn. Are they?

JAMES God. They are.

FELICITY What's all this then? What are two nice boys like you doing in a place like this?

JAMES and FREDDIE *stare haughtily into space, as if nothing has happened.*

FELICITY And I suppose you want to dance now.

FREDDIE (*looking doubtfully at JAMES*) Do we?

FELICITY Good, because we'd much rather drink. Come on, they're on us.

JAMES Oh all right.

THEY get in, FELICITY next to FREDDIE, MIRANDA winks at FELICITY and smiles glaringly at JAMES, who looks diffidently at the table. Meanwhile, FREDDIE is trying vainly to attract the attention of a waitress, saying 'Uh . . . Uh', and snapping his fingers weakly. FELICITY sighs.

FELICITY Hey.

WAITRESS *instantly appears.*

FELICITY (*to boys*) What's it to be?

JAMES Um . . . Campari and soda, please.

FREDDIE Don't have that, James, please. It only makes you giggly.

JAMES Ha ha. I want a Campari and soda.

FREDDIE Well don't make a spectacle of yourself. I'll have a, a Dubonnet. With lemon but no ice. No ice. Just lemon.

JAMES Look who's talking.

FELICITY And two whiskies.

MIRANDA (*handing round cigarettes* — FELICITY *accepts, boys refuse*) Big ones.

JAMES We don't smoke.

MIRANDA Haven't seen you down here before. I'm Miranda, by the way.

FELICITY (*smiling*) I'm Felicity.

Silence.

FELICITY Well what are your names, for Christ's sake?

FREDDIE Oh. That's James. I'm called Freddie.

FELICITY How do you do. I said we haven't seen you down here before.

FREDDIE (*dryly* — *slight stress on 'not'*) We do not come here often.

MIRANDA Yes, I know what you mean.

Silence.

MIRANDA Where do you usually go?

JAMES and FREDDIE *turn to each other. They shrug, and sip at the remains of their drinks.*

MIRANDA (*to FELICITY*) This is fun, isn't it?

WAITRESS *reappears.*

WAITRESS Bar's closed.

Girls' postures flop.

FREDDIE (*looking at his watch*) Is it that late? James, oughtn't we better —

JAMES (*to waitress*) Have you got any Fanta? Lemon Fanta?

FELICITY Fanta! Fuck Fanta. (*gathering her things*) Our place. There's some wine. Let's go.

FREDDIE and JAMES *look at each other with exaggerated bewilderment.*

JAMES But it's nearly . . . it's nearly . . .

MIRANDA (*with tired contempt*) Come on. Let's go.

JAMES and FREDDIE *look at each other expressionlessly. They shrug.*

* * *

Return to the pub. The girls are flushed and ironical, enjoying themselves.

FELICITY Talk about getting swept off your feet.

MIRANDA I was helpless, your Honour. He was like — like some sort of animal.

FELICITY Anyway he's pulled his socks up and he's really quite daring now. Or at least he thinks he's quite daring now. What about James? (*Hardly moving her lips, like a ventriloquist*) Seen the one by the fruit-machine?

MIRANDA (*Follows FELICITY's glance. Her eyes bulge a little bit and she nods quickly three or four times*) Oh, James. (*Bored*) Same sort of thing. (*Wags her head at the dartboard.*) Want a game?

FELICITY (*attracts the barman's attention and forks her fingers at the beer-glasses*) Two more.

Cut to JAMES, sitting erect and quite still at the kitchen table, smoothing the creases of the inside elbows of his jacket with slow, robotic hands. He watches with interest as FREDDIE pours out the drinks, places them on the table, and sits down beside him.

They laugh.

MIRANDA (in a fruity voice) Heard the one about the — (Halts.) Oh, God.

They have reached their destination. FELICITY extends a hand gingerly towards the bell (one of many). They look at each other like two commandos about to make a perilous dash.

FELICITY Well here goes.

Cut to the kitchen. FREDDIE and JAMES, in their drowsy style, are having a shriek and a giggle. Their faces are animated. JAMES's hand flaps playfully on FREDDIE's forearm.

JAMES And then you got those really bad-buy shiny blue trousers from Biba!

FREDDIE (smiling ruefully) Yes. They were a mistake.

JAMES They were so shiny you could see your face in the seat. You looked quite revolting, Freddie — everyone said so.

FREDDIE Wasn't it about then that you were wearing your belt outside your jersey.

JAMES (tickled, pawing a hand helplessly in the air towards FREDDIE) Aah! Don't! Please!

FREDDIE And I said. 'James, are you quite sure that the belt thing is good?'

JAMES And what did I say — I said — The bell rings. The boys freeze.

JAMES Oh, God.

FREDDIE (looking at JAMES grimly) Well here goes.

Cut to the boys' sitting-room. Things seem surprisingly normal: the boys help the girls off with their coats, kiss their cheeks, mutter pleasant hellos. The boys are unexpectedly solicitous, the girls unexpectedly diffident. Once they are settled, though, a silence falls, a silence so complete and clueless that it could almost be the night they first met.

FELICITY What are we going to do?

JAMES (folding his arms) Well for a start we're going out to dinner.

FREDDIE (folding his arms) For a start.

MIRANDA But it spins the evening out so much.

JAMES No. We insist. Freddie and I've decided.

FELICITY But we wanted to go to the murder film at the Classic.

FREDDIE Too bad. What's wrong with going out to dinner?

MIRANDA It takes hours.

FREDDIE Only as long as a film.

MIRANDA But in a film you don't have to . . .

FREDDIE Don't have to what?

JAMES (bitchily) You never even watch the film anyway. It's just back-row stuff as far as you're concerned.

FELICITY So?

FREDDIE (bitterly) You get enough of that later on. I mean, all James and I want to do is hot things up with a bit of conversation, that's all.

FELICITY That's what's wrong with dinner. Conversation.

FREDDIE (sharply) Now what do you mean?

FELICITY (sighing) It's just that you're a bit boring, Fred.

A silence.

JAMES (hesitantly) . . . Miranda, I'm not boring, am I?

MIRANDA A bit, James.

FREDDIE and JAMES turn to each other in frank consternation, then back to the girls. During the following speeches the girls look at each other boredly.

JAMES Well thanks very much.

FREDDIE Yes, I suppose people like you would find anything not actually physical 'a bit boring'.

JAMES I mean honestly, can't you ever think about anything else?

FREDDIE We're not machines — we're human beings.

FELICITY (tonelessly to MIRANDA) I've got it. Why don't they go out to dinner and we go to the film?

JAMES . . . And what? . . . Meet up after?

FREDDIE (still bitter) Yes, I suppose that's all we're good for. Not for talking. Not for going out together. Just for that. That's the only thing we're any good for, isn't it? Isn't it?

FELICITY (fairly nastily) Not really.

FREDDIE (stunned) I think you'd better leave.

MIRANDA So do I.

JAMES and FREDDIE stare at each other as the girls pick up their coats. They leave.

Cut to FELICITY and MIRANDA walking along the street, springy-stepped.

FELICITY (brightly) Well that was fairly painless, wasn't it?

MIRANDA Didn't even have to go out with them.

FELICITY Didn't even have to let them down easy.

MIRANDA Didn't even have to get them on their own.

FELICITY Didn't even have to waste an evening on it.

MIRANDA I feel better already.

FELICITY Me too.

MIRANDA A quick one, the film, and a club-crawl?

FELICITY You bet.

Cut back to the boys' kitchen. They sit at the table, blank and becalmed.

JAMES Fancy them just saying that.

FREDDIE We saw them in their true colours tonight. They're all the same.

JAMES Still. We did what we set out to do. I mean, it was what we wanted to do, wasn't it?

FREDDIE Oh yeah. Absolutely.

JAMES I could do with an early night.

FREDDIE Got all that ironing to do.

JAMES Give me a chance to wash my hair.

FREDDIE Try my conditioner if you like, James.

JAMES Can I? That green stuff?

They get up to leave the room.

FREDDIE Yes. Makes it far more manageable and gives it that bit of bounce.

JAMES Doesn't it go all fluffy though?

FREDDIE Not if you wait for a few minutes after the second rinse. Then add a little water and . . .

They disappear.

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