

Ian McEwan

Butterflies



I saw my first corpse on Thursday. Today it was Sunday and there was nothing to do. And it was hot. I have never known it so hot in England. Towards midday I decided on a walk. I stood outside the house, hesitating. I was not sure whether to go left or right. Charlie was on the other side of the street, underneath a car. He must have seen my legs for he called out,

'How's tricks?' I never have ready answers to questions like that. I fumbled in my mind for several seconds, and said,

'How are you, Charlie?' He crawled out. The sun was on my side of the street, straight into his eyes. He shielded them with his hand, and said,

'Where you off to now?' Again I did not know. It was Sunday, there was nothing to do, it was too hot ...

'Out,' I said. 'A walk ...' I crossed over and looked at the car's engine, although it meant nothing to me. Charlie is an old man who knows about machines. He repairs cars for the people in the street and their friends. He came round the side of the car carrying a heavy tool kit in two hands.

'She died, then?' He stood there wiping a spanner with cotton waste for something to do. He knew it already, of course, but he wanted to hear my story.

'Yes,' I told him. 'She's dead.' He waited for me to go

on. I leaned against the side of the car. Its roof was too hot to touch. Charlie prompted me.

'You saw her last ...'

'I was on the bridge. I saw her running by the canal.'

'You saw her ...'

'I didn't see her fall in.⁵ Charlie put the spanner back in the box. He was getting ready to crawl back under the car, his way of telling me the conversation was over. I was still deciding which way to walk. Before Charlie disappeared he said,

'Shame, great shame.'

I walked off to the left because that was the way I was facing. I walked down several streets, between privet hedges and hot, parked cars. Down each street there was the same smell of lunch cooking. I heard the same radio programme through open windows. I saw cats and dogs but very few people, and only from a distance. I took off my jacket and carried it over my arm. I wanted to be near trees and water. There are no parks in this part of London, only car parks. And there is the canal, the brown canal which goes between factories and past a scrap heap, the canal little Jane drowned in. I walked to the public library. I knew in advance it would be closed but I prefer to sit on the steps outside. I sat there now, in a shrinking patch of shade. A hot wind was blowing down the street. It stirred the litter round my feet. I watched a sheet of newspaper blown along the centre of the road, a piece out of the *Daily Mirror*. It stopped and I could read a part of a headline ... 'MAN WHO' ... There was nobody about. Round the corner I heard the tinkle of an ice-cream van and I realized I was thirsty. It was playing something out of a Mozart piano sonata. It stopped abruptly, in the middle of a note, as if someone had kicked the machine. I walked quickly up the street but when I got to the corner

it had gone. A moment later I heard it again, and it sounded a long way off.

I saw no one on the way back. Charlie had gone inside and the car he had been working on was no longer there. I drank water from the kitchen tap. I read somewhere that a glass of water from a London tap has been drunk five times before. It tasted metallic. It reminded me of the stainless steel table they put the little girl on, her corpse. They probably use tap water to clean the mortuary table tops. I was due to meet the girl's parents at 7 p.m. It was not my idea, it was the idea of one of the police sergeants, the one who took my statement. I should have been firm, but he got round me, he frightened me. When he spoke he held me by the elbow. It could be a trick they learn at police school to give them the power they need. He caught me as I was leaving the building and steered me into a corner. I could not shake him off without wrestling with him. He spoke kindly, urgently, in a cracked whisper.

'You were the last one to see the little girl before she died...' He lingered over this last word. And the parents, you know, of course they'd like to meet you.' He frightened me with his implications, whatever they were, and while he touched me he had the power. He tightened his hold a little. 'So I said you'd be along. You're almost next door to them, aren't you?' I think I looked away and nodded. He smiled, and it was fixed. Still, it was something, a meeting, an event to make sense of the day. In the late afternoon I decided to take a bath and dress up. I had time to kill. I found a bottle of cologne I had never opened before, and a clean shirt. While the bath ran I took off my clothes and stared at my body in the mirror. I am a suspicious-looking person, I know, because I have no chin. Although they could not say why, they suspected me at the police station before I even made a statement. I

told them I was standing on the bridge and that I saw her from the bridge, running along the canal. The police sergeant said,

'That was quite a coincidence, then, wasn't it? I mean, her living in the same street as you.' My chin and my neck are the same thing, and it breeds distrust. My mother's was like that, too. Only after I had left home did I find her grotesque. She died last year. Women do not like my chin, they won't come near me. It was the same for my mother, she never had friends. She went everywhere alone, even on holidays. Each year she went to Littlehampton and sat in a deck-chair by herself, facing out to sea. Towards the end of her life she became vicious and thin, like a whippet.

Until last Thursday when I saw Jane's corpse I never had special thoughts about death. I saw a dog run over once. I saw the wheel go over its neck and its eyeballs burst. It meant nothing to me at the time. And when my mother died I stayed away, from indifference, mainly, and a distaste for my relatives. I had no curiosity either about seeing her dead, thin and grey among the flowers. I imagine my own death to be something like hers. But at that time I had not seen a corpse. A corpse makes you compare living with dead. They led me down a stone staircase and along a corridor. I thought the mortuary would stand by itself, but it was in an office building, seven storeys high. We were in the basement. I heard typewriters from the foot of the stairs. The sergeant was there, and a couple of others in suits. He held the swing doors open for me. I did not really think she was going to be there. I forget now what I was expecting, a photograph, perhaps, and some documents to sign. I had not thought the matter out. But she was there. There were five high stainless-steel tables in a row. And there were fluorescent lights in green tin hoods hanging on long chains from the ceiling.

She was on the table nearest the door. She was on her back, palms turned upwards, legs together, mouth wide open, eyes wide open, very pale, very quiet. Her hair was still a little damp. Her red dress looked newly washed. She smelled faintly of the canal. I suppose it was nothing exceptional if you had seen enough corpses, like the police sergeant. There was a small bruise over her right eye. I wanted to touch her but I had the feeling they were watching me closely. Like a secondhand-car salesman, the man in the white coat said briskly,

'Only nine years old.' No one responded, we all looked at her face. The sergeant came round my side of the table with some papers in his hand.

'O.K. ?' he said. We went back down the long corridor. Upstairs I signed the papers which said that I had been walking across the footbridge by the railway lines and that I had seen a girl, identified as the one downstairs, running along the canal towpath. I looked away and a little later I saw something red in the water which sank out of sight. Since I cannot swim I fetched a policeman, who peered into the water and said he could see nothing. I gave my name and address and went home. An hour and a half later they pulled her up from the bottom with a dragline. I signed three copies of the statement. After that I did not leave the building for a long time. In one of the corridors I found a moulded plastic chair and sat in it. Opposite me, through an open doorway, I could see two girls typing in their office. They saw me watching them and spoke to each other and laughed. One of them came out smiling and asked me if I was being seen to. I told her I was just sitting and thinking. The girl went back into her office, leaned across her desk and told her friend. They glanced at me uneasily. They suspected me of something, they always do. I was not really thinking about the dead girl downstairs. I

had confused images of her, alive and dead, but I tried not to reconcile them. I sat there all afternoon because I did not feel like going anywhere else. The girls closed their office door. I finally left because everyone had gone home and they wanted to lock up. I was the last to leave the building.

I took a long time getting dressed. I ironed my black suit, I thought black was appropriate. I chose a blue tie because I did not want to go too far with the black. Then, as I was about to leave the house, I changed my mind. I went back upstairs and took off the suit, shirt and tie. I was suddenly annoyed at myself for my preparations. Why was I so anxious to have their approval? I put on the old trousers and sweater I was wearing before. I regretted taking a bath and I tried to wash the cologne off the back of my neck. But there was another smell, that of the scented soap I had used in the bath. I used the same soap on Thursday, and that was the first thing the little girl said to me,

'You smell like flowers.' I was walking past her small front garden, setting off on a walk. I ignored her. I avoid talking to children, I find it hard to get the right tone with them. And their directness bothers me, it cramps me. I had seen this one many times before playing in the street, usually by herself, or watching Charlie. She came out of her garden and followed me.

'Where are you going?' she said. Again I ignored her, hoping she would lose interest in me. Furthermore, I had no clear idea where I was walking to. She asked me again, 'Where are you going?'

After a pause I said, 'Never you mind.' She walked right behind me where I could not see her. I had the feeling she was imitating my walk but I did not turn round to look.

'Are you going to Mr Watson's shop?'

'Yes I'm going to Mr Watson's shop.'

She came up level with me. 'Because it's closed today,' she said, 'it's Wednesday.' I had no reply to this. When we came to the corner at the end of the street she said,

'Where are you going really?' I looked at her closely for the first time. She had a long delicate face and large mournful eyes. Her fine brown hair was tied in bunches in red ribbon to match her red cotton dress. She was beautiful in a strange almost sinister way, like a girl in a Modigliani painting. I said,

'I don't know, I'm just going for a walk.'

'I want to come.' I said nothing, and we walked together towards the shopping centre. She was silent too, and walked a little behind me as if she was waiting for me to tell her to turn back. She brought out a game which all the children have round here. They have two hard balls on the ends of pieces of string which they knock together rapidly by some motion of their hand. It makes a clacking sound like a football rattle. I think she was doing it to please me. It made it harder to send her away. And I had spoken to no one in several days.

When I came downstairs after changing my clothes again it was a quarter past six. Jane's parents lived twelve houses away on my side of the street. Since I had finished my preparations forty-five minutes early, I decided on a walk to kill time. The street was in shadow now. I hesitated by the front door, thinking of the best route. Charlie was across the road repairing another car. He saw me, and without particularly wanting to I walked over to him. He looked up without smiling.

'Where you off to this time?' He spoke to me as if I were a child.

'Taking some air,' I said, 'taking some evening air.'

Charlie likes to know what is happening in the street. He knows everyone along here, including all the children. I had often seen the little girl out there with him. The last time she was holding a spanner for him. For some reason Charlie held her death against me. He had had all Sunday to think about it. He wanted to hear my story, but he could not bring himself to ask direct questions.

'Seeing her parents, then? Seven o'clock?'

'Yes, seven o'clock.' He waited for me to go on. I circled round the car. It was large, old and rusty, a Ford Zodiac, the kind of car you get in this street. It belonged to the Pakistani family who ran the small shop at the end of the street. For their own reasons they called the shop 'Watson's'. Their two sons were beaten up by local skin-heads. They were saving money now to return to Peshawar. The old man used to tell me about it when I went to his shop, how he was taking his family home because of violence and bad weather in London. Charlie said to me from the other side of Mr Watson's car,

'She was their only.' He was accusing me.

'Yes,' I said, 'I know. Great shame.' We circled round the car. Then Charlie said,

'It was in the paper. Did you see it? It said you saw her go down.'

'That's right.'

'Couldn't reach her, then?'

'No, I couldn't. She sank.' I made my circle round the car wider and edged off. I knew Charlie's eyes were on me all the way down the street, but I did not turn round to acknowledge his suspicion.

At the end of the street I pretended to look up at an aeroplane and glanced back over my shoulder. Charlie was standing by the car, hands on hips, still watching me. There was a large black-and-white cat sitting at his feet.

I saw all this in a glimpse and turned the corner. It was half past six. I decided to walk to the library to use up the remaining time. It was the same walk I took earlier on. There were more people about now. I passed a group of West Indian boys playing football in the street. Their ball rolled towards me and I stepped over it. They stood about waiting while one of the younger boys collected the ball. As I edged past them they were silent, and watching me closely. As soon as I was past, one of them threw a small stone along the road at my feet. Without turning and almost without looking I trapped it neatly with my foot. It was an accident I did it so well. They all laughed at this and clapped and cheered me, so that for one elated moment I thought I could go back and join in their game. The ball was returned and they started to play again. The moment passed and I walked on. My heart was beating fast from the excitement of it. Even when I came to the library and sat down on the steps I could feel the thumping of my pulse in my temples. Such opportunities are rare for me. I do not meet many people, in fact the only ones I talk to are Charlie and Mr Watson. I speak to Charlie because he is there when I leave my front door; he is always the one to speak first, and there is no avoiding him if I want to leave the house. I do not talk to Mr Watson so much as listen, and I listen because I have to go into his shop to buy groceries. To have someone walking along with me on Wednesday was something of an opportunity, too, even if it was only a little girl with nothing to do. Although I would not have admitted it at the time, I felt pleased that she was genuinely curious about me, and I was attracted to her. I wanted her to be my friend.

But I was uneasy at first. She was walking a little behind me, playing with her toy and, for all I knew, making gestures behind my back the way children do. Then, when

we came to the main shopping street, she came up to my side.

'Why don't you go to work?' she said. 'My dad goes to work every day except Sunday.'

'I don't need to go to work.'

'Have you got lots of money already?' I nodded. 'Really lots?'

'Yes.'

'Could you buy me something if you wanted to?'

'If I wanted to.' She was pointing at a toyshop window.

'One of those, please, go on, one of those, go on.' She was hanging on my arm, she was making a greedy little dance on the pavement and trying to push me towards the shop. No one had touched me intentionally like that for a long time, not since I was a child. I felt a cold thrill in my stomach and I was unsteady on my legs. I had some money in my pocket and I could see no reason why I should not buy her something. I made her wait outside while I went in the shop and bought her what she wanted, a small, pink, naked doll, moulded from one piece of plastic. Once she had it she seemed to lose interest in it. Farther down the same street she asked me to buy her an ice cream. She stood in the doorway of the shop waiting for me to follow. She did not touch me this time. Of course, I hesitated, I was not sure what was happening. But I was curious about her now, and the effect she was having on me. I gave her enough money to buy ices for both of us and let her go in and get them. She was obviously used to gifts. When we were a little farther down the street I asked her in the friendliest way,

'Don't you say thank you when someone gives you things?' She looked at me scornfully, her thin, pale lips circled with ice cream:

'No.'

I asked her her name. I wanted our conversation to be amiable.

'Jane.'

'What happened to the doll I bought you, Jane?' She glanced down at her hand.

'I left it in the sweet shop.'

'Didn't you want it?'

'I forgot it.' I was about to tell her to run back and get it when I realized how much I wanted her to stay with me, and how close we were to the canal.

The canal is the only stretch of water near here. There is something special about walking by water, even brown stinking water running along the backs of factories. Most of the factories overlooking the canal are windowless and deserted. You can walk a mile and a half along the tow-path and usually you meet no one. The path goes by an old scrap yard. Up until two years ago a quiet old man watched over the pile of junk from a small tin hut outside which, chained to a post, he kept a large Alsatian dog. It was too old to bark. Then the hut, the old man and the dog disappeared and the gate was padlocked. Gradually the surrounding fence was trampled down by the local kids, so that now only the gate stands. The scrap yard is the only thing of interest in that mile and a half because for the rest of the walk the path runs close to the factory walls. But I like the canal and I find it less of a confinement there by the water than anywhere else in this part of town. After walking with me in silence for a while Jane asked me again,

'Where are you going? Where are you going to walk?'

'Along the canal.'

She thought about this for a minute. I'm not allowed by the canal.'

'Why not?'

'Because.' She was walking slightly in front of me now. The white ring around her mouth had dried. My legs were weak and I felt suffocated by the sun's heat rising off the pavement. It had become a necessity to persuade her to walk along the canal with me. I sickened at the idea. I threw the rest of my ice cream away, and said,

'I walk along the canal nearly every day.'

'Why?'

'It's very peaceful there ... and there are all kinds of things to look at.'

'What things?'

'Butterflies.' The word was out before I could retrieve it. She turned round to me, suddenly interested. Butterflies could never survive near the canal, the stench would dissolve them. It would not take her long to find that out.

'What colour butterflies?'

'Red ones ... yellow ones.'

'What else is there?'

I hesitated. 'There's a scrap yard.' She wrinkled her nose. I continued quickly, 'And boats, too, boats on the canal.'

'Real boats?'

'Yes, of course, real boats.' Again this was not what I had intended. She stopped walking and I stopped too. She said,

'You won't tell on me if I come, will you?'

'No, I won't tell anyone, but you have to keep close to me when we're walking along the canal, understand?' She nodded. 'And wipe the ice cream off your mouth.' She trailed the back of her hand vaguely across her face. 'Come here, let me do it.' I pulled her towards me and cupped my left hand round the back of her neck. I wetted the forefinger of the other hand, the way I had seen parents do it,

and ran it round her lips. I had never touched another person's lips before, nor had I experienced this kind of pleasure. It rose painfully from my groin to my chest and lodged itself there, like a fist pushing against my ribs. I wetted the same finger again and tasted the sticky sweetness on the end of it. I rubbed it round her lips once more and this time she pulled away.

'You hurt me,' she said. 'You pressed too hard.' We walked on, and now she kept close by me.

To get down to the towpath we had to cross the canal first by a narrow black bridge with high walls. Half way across, Jane stood on tiptoe and tried to look over the wall.

'Lift me up,' she said, 'I want to look at the boats.'

'You can't see them from here.' But I placed my hands round her waist and lifted her up. Her short red dress rode up over her backside and I felt the fist in my chest again. She called over her shoulder to me,

'The river's very dirty.'

'It's always been dirty,' I said, 'it's a canal.' As we walked down the stone steps to the towpath Jane moved closer to me. I had the feeling she was holding her breath. Usually the canal flows north, but today it was completely still. On the surface there were patches of yellow scum, and they did not move either because there was no wind to push them along. Occasionally a car passed on the bridge above us and beyond that there was the distant sound of London traffic. Apart from that it was very quiet by the canal. Because of the heat the canal smell was stronger today, an animal rather than a chemical smell given off by the scum. Jane whispered,

'Where are the butterflies?'

'They're not far. We have to go under two bridges first.'

'I want to go back. I want to go back.' We were now

over a hundred yards from the stone steps. She wanted to stop but I was urging her along. She was too frightened to leave my side and run back to the steps by herself.

'Not far now and we'll see the butterflies. Red ones, yellow ones, sometimes green ones.' I abandoned myself to the lie, I did not care what I told her now. She put her hand in mine.

'And what about the boats?'

'You'll see them. Farther up.' We walked on and I thought of nothing but of how to keep her with me. At certain points along the canal there are tunnels under factories, roads and railway lines. The first of these we came to was formed by a three-storey building which connects the factories on either side of the canal. It was empty now, like all the factories, and all the nearer windows were broken. At the entrance to this tunnel Jane tried to pull back.

'What's that noise? Let's not go in there.' She could hear water dripping from the roof of the tunnel into the canal, it echoed in a strange, hollow way.

'It's only water,' I said. 'Look, you can see through to the other side.' The path was very narrow in the tunnel so I made her walk in front of me and kept my hand on her shoulder. She was shivering. At the far end she stopped suddenly and pointed. Where the sunlight entered the tunnel a little way there was a flower growing from between the bricks. It looked like some kind of dandelion, growing out of a small tuft of grass.

'It's coltsfoot,' she said, and picked it and put it in her hair, behind her ear. I said,

'I've never seen flowers along here before.'

'There have to be flowers,' she explained, 'for the butterflies.'

For the next quarter of an hour we walked in silence.

Jane spoke once to ask me again about the butterflies. She seemed less afraid of the canal now and let go of my hand. I wanted to touch her but I could think of no way of doing that without frightening her. I tried to think of a conversation we might have but my mind was blank. The path was beginning to widen out to our right. Round the next bend of the canal in an immense space between a factory and a warehouse was the scrap yard. There was black smoke in the sky ahead of us, and as we came round the bend I saw that it was coming from the scrap yard. A group of boys stood round the fire they had built. They were some kind of gang, they all wore the same blue jackets and cropped hair. As far as I could tell they were preparing to roast a live cat. The smoke hung above them in the still air, behind them the scrapheap towered like a mountain. They had the cat tied up by its neck to a post, the same post the Alsatian dog used to be tied to. The cat's front and back legs were tied together. They were constructing a cage over the fire made up of pieces of wire fencing and as we came past one of them was dragging the cat by the string around its neck towards the fire. I took Jane's hand and walked faster. They were working intently and in silence, and they hardly paused to glance up at us. Jane kept her eyes on the ground. Through her hand I could feel her whole body shaking.

'What were they doing to that cat?'

'I don't know.' I looked back over my shoulder. It was difficult to see what they were doing now because of the black smoke. We were leaving them far behind and our path was once more along the factory walls. Jane was almost crying, and her hand was only in mine because I was holding it hard. It was not necessary really for there was nowhere she would dare run by herself. Back along the path past the scrap yard, or forwards into the tunnel we

were approaching. I had no idea what was going to happen when we came to the end of the path. She would want to run home, and I just knew I could not let her go. I put it out of my mind. At the entrance to the second tunnel, Jane stopped.

'There aren't any butterflies, are there?' Her voice rose at the end because she was about to cry. I started to tell her that perhaps it was too hot for them. But she was not listening to me, she was wailing,

'You said a lie, there aren't any butterflies, you said a lie.' She started to cry in a half-hearted, miserable way and tried to pull her hand free from mine. I reasoned with her but she would not listen. I tightened my grip on her hand and pulled her into the tunnel. She was screaming now, a piercing continuous sound echoing back from the walls and roof of the tunnel and filling my head. I carried and dragged her right into the tunnel, about half way. And there, suddenly, her screams were drowned out by the thunder of a train going over our heads, and the air and the ground shook together. It took a long time for the train to pass. I held her arms at her sides, but she did not struggle, the din was overpowering her. When the last echoes had died away she said dully,

'I want my mummy.' I unzipped my fly. I did not know if she could see in the dark what was stretching out towards her.

'Touch it,' I said, and shook her gently by the shoulder. She did not move, so I shook her again.

'Touch me, go on. You know what I mean, don't you?' It was quite a simple thing I wanted really. This time I took her in both hands and shook her hard and shouted.

'Touch it, touch it.' She reached out her hand and her fingers briefly brushed my tip. It was enough, though. I doubled up and came, I came into my cupped hands. Like

the train, it took a long time, pumping it all out into my hand. All the time I spent by myself came pumping out, all the hours walking alone and all the thoughts I had had, it all came out into my hand. When it was over I remained in that position for several minutes, bent up with my cupped hands in front of me. My mind was clear, my body was relaxed and I was thinking of nothing. I lay on my stomach, reached down and washed my hands in the canal. It was difficult to get the stuff off in cold water. It stuck to my fingers like scum. I picked it off in bits. Then I remembered the girl, she was no longer with me. I could not let her run home now, not after this. I would have to go after her. I stood and saw her silhouetted against the end of the tunnel. She was walking slowly along the edge of the canal in a daze. I could not run quickly because I could not see the ground in front of me. The nearer I got to the sunlight at the end of the tunnel, the harder it was to see. Jane was almost out of the tunnel. When she heard my footsteps behind her she turned round and gave a kind of yelp. She started to run too, and immediately lost her footing. From where I was it was difficult to see what happened to her, her silhouette against the sky suddenly disappeared into the black. She was lying face down when I reached her, with her left leg trailing off the path almost into the water. She had banged her head going down and there was a swelling over her right eye. Her right arm was stretched out in front of her and almost reached into the sunlight. I bent down to her face and listened to her breathing. It was deep and regular. Her eyes were closed tight and the lashes were still wet from crying. I no longer wanted to touch her, that was all pumped out of me now, into the canal. I brushed away some dirt from her face and some more from the back of her red dress.

'Silly girl,' I said, 'no butterflies.' Then I lifted her up

gently, as gently as I could so as not to wake her, and eased her quietly into the canal.

I usually sit by the library steps, I prefer it to going inside and reading books. There is more to learn outside. I sat there now, Sunday evening, listening to my pulse slow down to its daily rhythm. Over and over again I ran through what had happened, and what I should have done. I saw the stone skimming along the road, and I saw myself trap it neatly with my foot, almost without turning. I should have turned round then, slowly, acknowledging their applause with a faint grin. Then I should have kicked the stone back, or better, stepped over it and walked casually towards them, and then, when the ball came back, I would be with them, one of them, in a team. I would play with them out there in the street most evenings, learn all their names and they would know mine. I would see them in town during the day and they would call out to me from the other side of the street, cross over and chat. At the end of the game one of them comes over to me and grips my arm.

'See you tomorrow, then ...'

'Yes, tomorrow.' We would go out drinking together when they were older, and I would learn to like beer. I stood up and began to walk slowly back the way I had come. I knew I would not be joining any football games. The opportunities are rare, like butterflies. You stretch your hand out and they are gone. I went along the street where they had been playing. It was deserted now and the stone I had stopped with my foot was still in the middle of the road. I picked it up and put it in my pocket, and then walked on to keep my appointment.