

PLUME • ISBN 0-452-07064-2 • U.S.A. \$7.95

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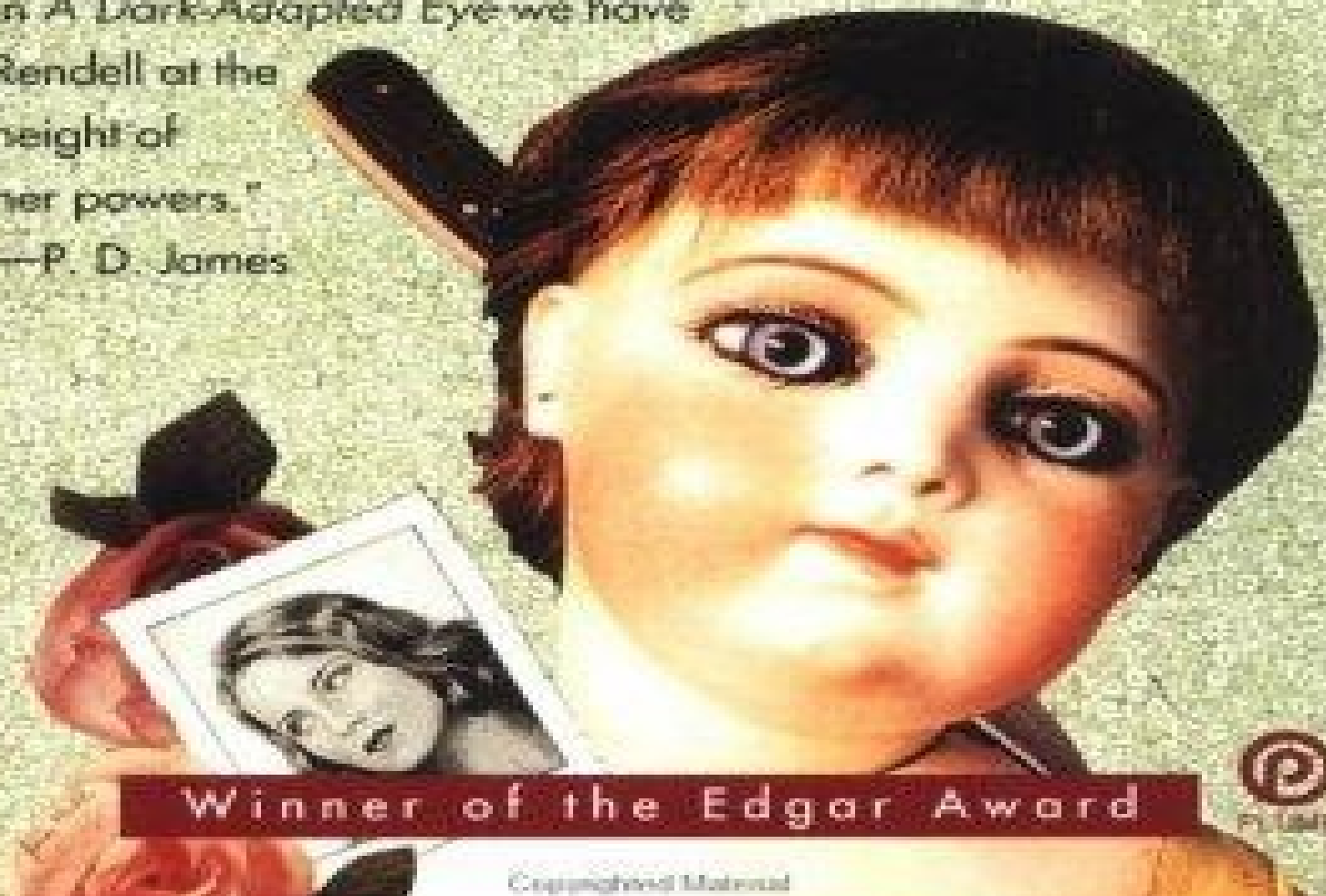
WRITING AS

BARBARA VINE

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DARK-ADAPTED EYE

"A rich, beautifully crafted novel . . .  
In *A Dark-Adapted Eye* we have  
Rendell at the  
height of  
her powers."  
—P. D. James



Winner of the Edgar Award



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**Barbara Vine**

## **A Dark-Adapted Eye**

DARK ADAPTATION a condition of vision brought about progressively by remaining in complete darkness for a considerable period, and characterized by progressive increase in retinal sensitivity. A darkadapted eye is an eye in which dark adaptation has taken place

--James Drever, A Dictionary of Psychology

On the morning Vera died I woke up very early. The birds had started, more of them and singing more loudly in our leafy suburb than in the country. They never sang like that outside Vera's windows in the Vale of Dedham. I lay there listening to something repeating itself monotonously. A thrush, it must have been, doing what Browning said it did and singing each song twice over. It was a Thursday in August, a hundred years ago. Not much more than a third of that, of course. It only feels so long. In these circumstances alone one knows when someone is going to die. All other deaths can be predicted, conjectured, even anticipated with some certainty, but not to the hour, the minute, with no room for hope. Vera would die at eight o'clock and that was that. I began to feel sick. I lay there exaggeratedly still, listening for some sound from the next room. If I was awake my father would be. About my mother I was less sure. She had never made a secret of her dislike of both his sisters. It was one of the things which had made a rift between them, though there they were together in the next room, in the same bed still. People did not break a marriage, leave each other, so lightly in those days.

I thought of getting up but first I wanted to make sure where my father was. There was something terrible in the idea of encountering him in the passage, both of us dressing-gowned, thickened with sleeplessness, each seeking the bathroom and each politely giving way to the other. Before I

saw him I needed to be washed and brushed and dressed, my loins girded. I could hear nothing but that thrush uttering its idiot phrase five or six times over, not twice.

To work he would go as usual, I was sure of that. And Vera's name would not be mentioned. None of it had been spoken about at all in our house since the last time my father went to see Vera. There was one crumb of comfort for him. No one knew. A man may be very close to his sister, his twin, without anyone knowing of the relationship, and none of our neighbors knew he was Vera Hillyard's brother. None of the bank's clients knew. If today the head cashier remarked upon Vera's death, as he very likely might, as people would by reason of her sex among other things, I knew my father would present to him a bland, mildly interested face and utter some suitable platitude. He had, after all, to survive.

A floorboard creaked in the passage. I heard the bedroom door close and then the door of the bathroom, so I got up and looked at the day. A clean white still morning, and no sun and no blue in the sky, a morning that seemed to me to be waiting because I was. Six-thirty. There was an angle you could stand at looking out of this window where you could see no other house, so plentiful were the trees and shrubs, so thick their foliage. It was like looking into a clearing in a rather elaborate wood. Vera used to sneer at where my parents lived, saying it was neither town nor country.

My mother was up now. We were all stupidly early, as if we were going away on holiday. When I used to go to Sindon I was sometimes up as early as this, excited and looking forward to it. How could I have looked forward to the society of Vera, an unreasonable carping scold when on her own with me, and when Eden was there the two of them closing ranks to exclude anyone who might try to penetrate their alliance? I hoped, I suppose. Each time I was older, and because of this she might change. She never did - until almost the end. And by then she was too desperate for an ally to be choosy.

I went to the bathroom. It was always possible to tell if my father had finished in the bathroom. He used an oldfashioned cutthroat razor and wiped the blade after each stroke on a small square of newspaper. The newspaper and the jug of hot water he fetched himself, but the remains were always left for my mother to clear away, the square of paper with its

load of shaving soap full of stubble, the empty jug. I washed in cold water. In summer, we only lit the boiler once a week for baths. Vera and Eden bathed every day, and that was one of the things I had liked about Sindon, my daily bath, though Vera's attitude always was that I would have escaped it if I could.

The paper had come. It was tomorrow the announcement would appear, of course, a few bald lines. Today there was nothing about Vera. She was stale, forgotten, until this morning, when, in a brief flare-up, the whole country would talk of her, those who deplored and those who said it served her right. My father sat at the dining table, reading the paper. It was the Daily Telegraph, than which no other daily paper was ever read in our family. The crossword puzzle he would save for the evening, just as Vera had done, once only in all the years phoning my father for the solution to a clue that was driving her crazy. When Eden had a home of her own and was rich, she often rang him up and got him to finish the puzzle for her over the phone. She had never been as good at it as they.

He looked up and nodded to me. He didn't smile. The table had yesterday's cloth on it, yellow check not to show the egg stains. Food was still rationed, meat being very scarce, and we ate eggs all the time, laid by my mother's chickens. Hence the crowing cockerels in our garden suburb, the fowl runs concealed behind hedges of lonicera and laurel. We had no eggs that morning, though. No cornflakes either. My mother would have considered cornflakes frivolous, in their white-and-orange packet. She had disliked Vera, had no patience with my father's intense family love, but she had a strong sense of occasion, of what was fitting. Without a word, she brought us toast that, while hot, had been thinly spread with margarine, a jar of marrow and ginger jam, a pot of tea.

I knew I shouldn't be able to eat. He ate. Business was to be as usual with him, I could tell that. It was over, wiped away, a monstrous effort made, if not to forget, at least to behave as if all was forgotten. The silence was broken by his voice, harsh and stagy, reading aloud. It was something about the war in Korea. He read on and on, columns of it, and it became embarrassing to listen because no one reads like that without introduction, explanation, excuse. It must have gone on for ten minutes. He read to the

foot of the page, to where presumably you were told the story was continued inside. He didn't turn over. He broke off in midsentence. "In the Far," he said, never getting to "East" but laying the paper down, aligning the pages, folding it once, twice, and once more, so that it was back in the shape it had been when the boy pushed it through the letterbox.

"In the Far" hung in the air, taking on a curious significance, quite different from what the writer had intended. He took another piece of toast but got no further towards eating it. My mother watched him. I think she had been tender with him once but he had had no time for it or room for it and so her tenderness had withered for want of encouragement. I did not expect her to go to him and take his hand or put her arms round him. Would I have done so myself if she had not been there? Perhaps. That family's mutual love had not usually found its expression in outward show. In other words, there had not been embraces. The twins, for instance, did not kiss each other, though the women pecked the air around each other's faces.

It was a quarter to eight now. I kept repeating over and over to myself (like the thrush, now silent), "In the far, in the far." When first it happened, when he was told, he went into paroxysms of rage, of disbelief, of impotent protest.

"Murdered, murdered!" he kept shouting, like someone in an Elizabethan tragedy, like someone who bursts into a castle hall with dreadful news. And then, "My sister!" and "My poor sister!" and "My little sister!"

But silence and concealment fell like a shutter. It was lifted briefly, after Vera was dead, when, sitting in a closed room after dark, like conspirators, he and I heard from Josie what happened that April day. He never spoke of it again. His twin was erased from his mind and he even made himself incredibly-into an only child. Once I heard him tell someone that he had never regretted having no brothers or sisters.

It was only when he was ill and not far from death himself that he resurrected memories of his sisters. And the stroke he had had, as if by some physiological action stripping away layers of reserve and inhibition, making him laugh sometimes and just as often cry, released an unrestrained gabbling about how he had felt that summer. His former love for Vera the

repressive years had turned to repulsion and fear, his illusions broken as much by the tug-of war and Eden's immorality-his word, not mine-as by the murder itself. My mother might have said, though she did not, that at last he was seeing his sisters as they really were.

He left the table, his tea half-drunk, his second piece of toast lying squarely in the middle of his plate, the Telegraph folded and lying with its edges compulsively lined up to the table corner. No word was spoken to my mother and me. He went upstairs, he came down, the front door closed behind him. He would walk the leafy roads, I thought, making detours, turning the half-mile to the station into two miles, hiding from the time in places where there were no clocks. It was then that I noticed he had left his watch on the table. I picked up the paper and there was the watch underneath.

"We should have gone away somewhere," I said.

My mother said fiercely, "Why should we? She hardly ever came here. Why should we let her drive us away?"

"Well, we haven't," I said.

I wondered which was right, the clock on the wall that said five to eight or my father's watch that said three minutes to. My own watch was upstairs. Time passes so slowly over such points in it. There still seemed an aeon to wait. My mother loaded the tray and took it into the kitchen, making a noise about it, banging cups, a way of showing that it was no fault of hers. Innocent herself, she had been dragged into this family by marriage, all unknowing. It was another matter for me, who was of their blood.

I went upstairs. My watch was on the bedside table. It was new, a present bestowed by my parents for getting my degree. That, because of what had happened, it was a less good degree than everyone had expected, no one had commented upon. The watch face was small, not much larger than the cluster of little diamonds in my engagement ring that lay beside it, and you had to get close up to it to read the hands. I thought: In a moment the heavens will fall, there will be a great bolt of thunder. Nature could not simply ignore. There was nothing. Only the birds had become silent, which

they would do anyway at this time, their territorial claims being made, their trees settled on, the business of their day begun. What would the business of my day be? One thing I thought I would do. I would phone Helen, I would talk to Helen. Symbolic of my attitude to my engagement, my future marriage, this was, that it was to Helen I meant to fly for comfort, not the man who had given me the ring with a diamond cluster as big as a watch face.

I walked over to the bedside table, stagily, selfconsciously, like a bad actress in an amateur production. The director would have halted me and told me to do it again, to walk away and do it again. I nearly did walk away so as not to see the time. But I picked up the watch and looked and had a long, rolling, falling feeling through my body as I saw that I had missed the moment. It was all over now and she was dead. The hands of the watch stood at five past eight.

The only kind of death that can be accurately predicted to the minute had taken place, the death that takes its victim, ... feet foremost through the floor, Into an empty space.

Three times in the past thirty-five years I had seen her name in print. Once was in a newspaper headline over one of the parts in a series on women hanged in England this century. I was sitting in a train and I looked sideways at the tabloid page the man next to me was reading. The letters in her name leapt out at me, bold, black, upright, making me jump. At the next stop I got out. I longed in one way to see that evening paper, The Star in those days, but in another I dreaded it and dread won. Before that she had been in The Times when the abolition of capital punishment was the big issue of the day. An MP mentioned her in debate and it got into the parliamentary report. But first I had seen her name in a library book.

VERA HILLYARD was printed on the book's spine along with RUTH ELLIS, EDITH THOMPSON, and two or three others. I took it cautiously from the shelf, looking about me to make sure no one was watching. I held it in my hands and felt the weight and shape of it, but to take it out of the library, to open it and read-that seemed too big a step. I would wait, I would prepare myself, I would get into a relaxed, objective frame of mind. Two days later I went back and the book had been taken out. By the time I

finally borrowed it, I had succeeded in putting aside fears and prohibitions and had worked myself into a state of excitement. I longed by then to know what some outside observer might have to say about my aunt.

It was a disappointment-more than that. The author had got it all wrong. He had mishandled the atmosphere, reproduced not at all the flavor of our family, and above all, he had missed the point. Indignant and annoyed, I was determined to write to him, for a whole day I was set on writing to him to point out that Vera wasn't a jealous virago, Eden a browbeaten innocent. But I no more wrote than I finished reading the book, for I understood that those chapters had served a purpose for me. A kind of catharsis had taken place, an exorcism, making me look things in the face and tell myself: She was only your aunt, it touches you only at a remove, you can think of it without real pain. And I found that I could. I was not involved, blood and bone, love and hate, as were those others so much closer to her. I even thought of writing something myself, an insider's account of Vera and of what led up to it all.

But there was Jamie to think of. That was before I had met him and talked to him by Lander's grave. The author of the account I had read wrote of him as a pawn who could know neither love nor pain, a wooden figure rather than a child, a puppet who was unimportant because he had not actually witnessed the murder but been snatched away in the nick of time and carried from the room. I had scarcely thought of him during the years in which he must have been growing up-incredible that I had once wistfully hoped to be made his godmother. But after I had read the piece in the library book, the piece that was so inaccurate and false that it might have been some other family the writer described, after that I began to think of him. I understood that he had become an embarrassment to certain family members. He was the catalyst who had brought it all about. It must have seemed to them that it would have been better if he had not been born-better for him too, and that is a dreadful thought. The wisest course, from his point of view and that of others, was to tuck him away. I thought then vaguely, unclearly, that one day when I was in Italy I would try to see him.

It was he in part, his existence, the fact that he had been born and was a man now capable of continued suffering, which stopped me writing

anything myself. Besides, I doubted my own abilities to reconstruct Vera's life. Memories I had, and many of them, but what of the great gaps, the spaces in the past? There were those years when I scarcely went to Sindon, stretches of time all-important in the fatal convergence of things, the winter for instance when Vera was ill, and the following year when she and Jamie escaped and fled like refugees from an oppressor.

Chad could have done it. He was a journalist, he knew how it should be done, and God knows he had seen as much of the unfolding and the fulfilled destinies as I had-more than I had, for he was always at Laurel Cottage, unable to keep away, fixated on a place, a house, as lovers are for whom bricks and mortar can soak up the essence of the beloved the way that nursery floor soaked up blood.

But did I, after all, particularly want a Vera book to be written? I had succeeded quite well at the business of forgetting her. My children were almost grown-up before they knew Vera Hillyard was their great-aunt-no, let me put that differently, before they knew that a woman who was their mother's aunt had been hanged for murder. The name of Vera Hillyard they had never heard. And when they knew, they weren't shocked, of course they weren't, only curious and rather excited. My husband and I never mentioned her. I don't think I heard my own mother, for the rest of her life, ever name her. Vera, in all that time, made herself known to me only in occasional dreams, when I would be a child again, and coming back from Anne's to Laurel Cottage on a warm summer evening, be reproached for my lateness or asked in Vera's peculiarly brisk querulous way how I ever thought I would be fit to do my schoolwork in the morning. Or I open a dream door into a dream room and Vera is sitting there, Madonna-like, tranquil and splendid, her breasts bare and the suckling Jamie in her arms. The baby never looks at me, he turns his face away or covers it with his arm. But he is Jamie and all roads always lead back to him.

We were staying in an hotel in the Via Cavour. Later on, Jamie told me it was the one in which Francis had stayed when first they met after twenty years apart. In Francis's room were two pictures, ugly abstracts in raucous colors, and pretentious too. He got two narrow strips of white adhesive paper, wrote on one in Italian Section Through a Blackhead and on the

other Contents of a Drain in the Borgo Pinti, and carefully attached each onto a picture. Jamie asked me to try to get into Room 36 and take a look if I could. I did and the stickers were still there, *Contenuto d'un Canale dal Borgo Pinti* and the other which I don't remember the Italian for. No chambermaid or bellboy had ever spotted them, and if guests had seen and marveled, they had never mentioned their discovery to the management. How typical of Francis this was! Jamie took a gleeful delight in it, in this aspect of Francis, laughing in his shrill hiccuping way at the very thought of Francis's teases and practical jokes. They had become friends of a kind, those two, the last thing one would have expected.

It was more than twenty years since I had seen Jamie, nearer twenty-five. Of course I knew he lived in Italy, had felt a special affinity with Italy since spending his school holidays with the Contessa who had a house somewhere near Verona. After school came to an end he stayed for a while in London with another Pearmain relative and then Tony sent him to the University of Bologna. Always, you see, he had to be kept out of sight, for he was an embarrassment and a reminder. In all this time I don't think Tony saw him but communicated with him through solicitors, like people in Victorian novels, turning him into a remittance man, but one who in this case had committed no offense. But this may not be so, or not quite so, or different in detail. Jamie's life has been and still is a mystery, his very existence a mystery.

Patricia it was who told me he was a journalist, a war correspondent who had been in Vietnam. Helen believed otherwise. In her version, Jamie worked at the Biblioteca Nazionale and had been one of those concerned in the salvaging of precious books when the Arno overflowed in the great library in November 1966. Francis might have told us the truth, but none of us, not even Helen regularly, kept in touch with Francis, except Gerald, his father. And Gerald, Helen said, must have been "going strange" even then, for he averred Francis had told him Jamie was a cook.

All these beliefs contained something of the truth, as such beliefs usually do. I went to Florence without any idea of looking Jamie up, for this was the third or fourth time I had been there, and without doing more than reflect that for a few days we would be in the same city, he and I. But at