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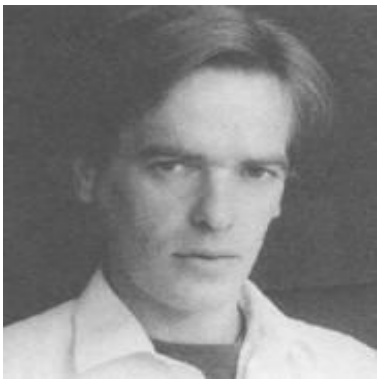

Martin Amis

Martin Amis is well known on both sides of the Atlantic as the author of *Time's Arrow, London Fields, Einstein's Monsters, Money, Other People, Success,* and *Dead Babies.* He has contributed to such periodicals as *Vanity Fair, The Observer,* and *The New Statesman.* He lives in London. His most recent novel is *The Information.*

forGully

The Rachel Papers

Seven o'clock: Oxford

My name is Charles Highway, though you wouldn't think it to look at me. It's such a rangy, well-travelled, big-cocked name and, to look at, I am none of these. I wear glasses for a start, have done since I was nine. And my medium-length, arseless waistless figure, corrugated ribcage and bandy legs gang up to dispel any hint of aplomb. (On no account, by the way, should this particular model be confused with the springy frames so popular among my contemporaries. They're quite different. I remember I used to have to fold the bands of my trousers almost double, and bulk out the seats with shirts intended for grown men. I dress more thoughtfully now, though, not so much with taste as with insight.) But I *have* got one of those fashionable reedy voices, the ones with the habitual ironic twang, excellent for the promotion of

oldster unease. And I imagine there's something oddly daunting about my face, too. It's angular, yet delicate; thin long nose, wide thin mouth -and the eyes: richly lashed, dark ochre with a twinkle of singed auburn ... ah, how inadequate these words seem.

The main thing about me, however, is that I am nineteen years of age, and twenty tomorrow.

Twenty, of course, is the real turning-point. Sixteen, eighteen, twenty-one: these are arbitrary milestones, enabling you only to get arrested for H.P.-payment evasion, get married, buggered, executed, and so on: external things. - Naturally, one avoids like the plague such mischievous doctrines as 'you're as young as you feel,' which have doubtless resulted in so many trim fifty-year-olds flopping down dead in their tracksuits, haggard hippies checking out on overdoses, precarious queers getting their caps and crowns stomped in by bestial hitch-hikers. Twenty may not be the start of maturity but, in all conscience, it's the end of youth.

To achieve, at once, dramatic edge and thematic symmetry I elect to place my time of birth on the stroke of midnight. In fact, mother's was a prolix and generally rather inelegant parturition; she went into labour about now (i.e., about seven p.m., December 5th, twenty years ago), not to come out of it again until past twelve, the result being a moist four-pound waif that had to be taken to hospital for a fortnight's priming. My father had intended - Christ knows why - to watch the whole thing, but got browned off after a couple of hours. I have long been sure that there is great significance in this anecdote, although I have never been able to track it down. Perhaps I'll find the answer at the moment at which, two decades earlier, I first sniffed the air.

I confess that I've been looking forward to tonight for months. I thought when Rachel turned up about half an hour ago that she was going to ruin it all, but she left in time. I need to make the transition decorously, officially, and to re-experience the tail-end of my youth. Because something has definitely happened to me, and I'm very keen to know what it is. So: if I run through, let's say, the last three months, and if I try to sort out all my precocity and childishness, my sixth-form cleverness and fifth-form nastiness, all the self-consciousness and self-disgust and self-infatuation and self- ... you name it, perhaps I'll be able to locate my *hamartia* and see what

kind of grownup I shall make. Or not, as the case may be. Anyway, it ought to be good fun.

Now it's - let me see - just gone seven. Five hours of teenage to go. Five hours; then I wander into that noisome Brob-dingnagian world the child sees as adulthood.

I snap open my dinky black suitcase and up-end it on the bed; folders, note-pads, files, bulging manilla envelopes, wads of paper trussed in string, letters, carbons, diaries, the marginalia of my youth, cover the patchwork quilt. I jostle the papers into makeshift stacks. Ought they to be arranged chronologically, by subject, or by theme? Patently, some rigorous clerking will have to be done tonight. At random I pick up a diary, cross the room, and lean against the bookcase, which creaks. I sip my wine and turn the page.

The second weekend of September. At that point I had only a couple more days of home to endure before going down to London. It was on the Thursday that my father, drinking spirits for the first time in years, had wondered why I didn't 'have a crack' at getting into Oxford and I had nodded back at him, wondering why not, too. I was going to have a year off before university anyway. My English master had always impressed upon me how fucking clever I was. I didn't particularly want to go anywhere else. It seemed logical.

Mother got all bustly the next morning (fixing everything up) but came on vague and spiritual over lunch and resolved to take an afternoon nap. When I asked her what there was left to do she free-associated, until it became clear, as a jigsaw becomes clear, that she had succeeded only in telling my sister that I would be coming to stay and also (one assumes) giving her the usual half-hour rundown on the perils of the late menopause, and other such female smut.

'So,' I said, 'I ring the Oxford Admissions and UCCA *and* the Tutors.'

Mother left the kitchen with one hand flat on her forehead and the other suspended in the air behind her. 'Yes, dear,' she called.

It took about an hour because I am surprisingly ineffective on the telephone. I spoke to key tarts in the University Administration complex and finally got on to the Tutors, where a shifty dotard told me that it wasn't for

him personally to say but he was fairly sure they would be able to fit me in. I realized then that I was half hoping for some insurmountable snag, like entrance dates. Yet it all seemed to be going forward.

I didn't know why I hoped this. Oxford meant more work, of course, but that was no problem. It meant more exams, but, again, I rather like having definite horizons, foreseeable crunches, to focus my anxieties on. Perhaps, as a person inclined to think structurally about his life, I had planned the next few months with my twentieth birthday in mind. There were several teenage things still to be done: get a job, preferably a menial, egalitarian one; have a first love, or at least sleep with an Older Woman; write a few more callow, brittle poems, thus completing my 'Adolescent Monologue' sequence; and, well, just marshal my childhood.

There is a less precious explanation. My family lives near Oxford, so if I went there I should have to spend more time at home. Furthermore, I dislike the town. Sorry: too many butterfly trendies, upper-class cunts, regional yobs with faces like gravy dinners. And the streets there are so affectedly narrow.

It is a Highway tradition that on Sunday afternoons, between the hours of four and five, any family representative can approach its senior member in what he calls his 'study' and there discuss matters, or crave assistance, or air grievances. One simply knocks and enters.

A small and rather hunted-looking figure now, my father said hello and asked what he could do for me, leaning over to empty the two-pint jug of real orange-juice, his daily ration, which he usually tucked away before eleven a.m. His eyes bulged warily over the discoloured glass as I told him that everything was fixed. There was a pause, and it occurred to me that he had forgotten the whole thing. But he soon roused himself. His hostile levity went like this :

'Super. I'm driving down tomorrow morning, I suppose I can take you along without too much trouble, so long as you don't bring all your worldly goods with you, that is. And don't worry yourself about Oxford. It's only the icing on the cake.'

'Sorry?'

'I mean it's just an extra.'

'Oh, absolutely. Thanks for the offer, by the way, but I think I'll take the train down. See you at dinner.'

I made myself some coffee in the kitchen and browsed through those Sunday papers that weren't draped over my mother's tent-like bulk on the sitting-room sofa. I wore a tired smirk. What did you expect? I thought. Outside, the sky was already beginning to turn shadowy mackerel. How soon would it get dark? I decided to leave for London straightway, while there was still time.

I suppose I really ought to explain.

The thing is that I am a member of that sad, ever-dwindling minority ... the child of an unbroken home. I have carried this albatross since the age of eleven, when I started at grammar school. Not a day would pass without somebody I knew turning out to be adopted or illegitimate, or to have mothers who were about to hare off with some bloke, or to have dead fathers and shabby stepfathers. What busy lives they led. How I envied their excuses for introspection, their ear-marked receptacles for every just antagonism and noble loyalty.

Once, last year, when we were all sixth-forming round the school coffee-bar (everyone else had to be in class), I was bor-ingly reproached by a friend for 'actually hating' my father, who wasn't villainous or despotic, after all, merely dismiss-ible. My friend quietly pointed out that he 'had no feelings of hatred' for his father, although he (the father) apparently spent most days with one fist down his wife's throat and the other up the au pair's bum. Precisely, I thought. I tipped my chair back against the wall and replied (somewhat high-mind-edly, having that week read a selection of D. H. Lawrence's essays):

'Not at all, Pete, you miss the point. Hatred is the only emotionally educated reaction to a sterile family environment. It's a destructive and ... painful emotion, perhaps, but I think I must not deny it if I am to keep my family alive in my imagination and my viscera, if not in my heart.'

Cor, I thought, and so did they. Pete looked at me now with moody respect, like a sceptic at a successful séance - which, of course, was exactly

how I looked; there it was, morally intelligible at last.

Not that there aren't, in my view, plenty of urgent reasons for hating him; it's just that he constitutes such a puny objective correlative, never does anything glamorously unpleasant. And, good Lord, in this day and age a kid has to have something to get worked up about, skimpy though his material may be. So the emotion that walks like a burglar through our house trying all the doors has found mine the only one unlocked, indeed wide open: for there are no valuables inside.

Now I kneel, take from the bed the largest stack of papers, and fan it out on the floor.

It's strange; although my father is probably the most fully documented character in my files, he doesn't merit a note-pad to himself, let alone a folder. Mother, of course, has her own portfolio, and my brothers and sisters each have the usual quarto booklet (excepting the rather inconsequential Saman-tha, who gets only a 3p Smith's Memorandum). Why nothing for my father? Is this a way of getting back at him ?

At the top left-hand corner of every page in which he features, I write 'F'.

My father has in all sired six children. I used to suspect that he had had so many just to show the catholicity of his tastes, to bolster his image as tolerant patriarch, to inform the world that his loins were rich in sons. There are in fact four boys, and he has given us progressively trendy names: Mark (twenty-six), Charles himself (pushing twenty), Sebastian (fifteen) and Valentine (nine). As against two girls. I sometimes wish I had been born female, if only to rectify this bias.

The most unattractive thing about him, or at any rate one of the most unattractive things about him, is that he gets fitter as he gets older. The minute he started to get rich (a mysterious process this, dating back some eight or nine years) he started also to take an increasingly lively interest in his health. He played tennis at weekends and squash three times a week at the Hurlingham. He gave up smoking and abstained from whisky and other harmful liquors. I correctly took this as a vulgar admission on my father's part that now he was richer he had every intention of living longer. A few months

ago I caught the old turd doing press-ups in his room.

He looks sweaty, too. Due no doubt to delayed shock, his hair began pouring out soon after the money began pouring in. For a while he tried things like combing the seaweed curls forward, practically from the nape of his neck, to form a Brylcreemed cap which any sudden movement would gash with etiolated scalp. But eventually he realized it wasn't on and let his hair go its own way, which it did, teasing itself into two grey-coloured wiry wings on either side of his else hair-free head. It was a great improvement, I'm sorry to say, combining with his large, pointed face and short-shanked body to give him a certain ferrety sexual presence.

For some time now, his ferrety favours have been the preserve of his mistress, as I was assured at the age of thirteen by my elder brother. Mark was raffishly mature about it and had no patience with my falsetto disgust. Gordon Highway, he explained, was still a healthy and vigorous man; his wife, on the other hand, was - well, look for yourself.

And I looked. What a heap. The skin had shrunken over her skull, to accentuate her jaw and to provide commodious cellarage for the gloomy pools that were her eyes; her breasts had long forsaken their native home and now flanked her navel; and her buttocks, when she wore stretch-slacks, would dance behind her knees like punch-balls. The gnomic literature she was reading empowered her to give up on her appearance. Off came her hair, on came the butch jeans and fisherman's jerseys. In her gardening clothes she resembled a *slightly* effeminate, though perfectly lusty, farm labourer.

Anyhow I rampaged enthusiastically about all this, largely I think as a reaction against my brother's greasy permissiveness. Also, I had never thought of my father as being particularly vigorous nor of mother as being particularly unattractive or of either of them as being anything but quietly, and asexually, content with each other. And I didn't want to see them this way, in sexual terms. I was too young.

Even this, though, you see, even this failed to put any bite, any real *spunk*, into family life.

The Highway kitchen, nine o'clock, any Monday morning:

'Are you off now, dear?'

My father pushes his grapefruit aside, swipes his mouth with a napkin. 'In a minute.'

'Shall I be able to reach you at the flat, or at the Kensington number?'

'Uh, the flat tonight and,' narrowing his eyes, 'I *think* on Wednesday. So the Kensington number Tuesday and probably' - flexing his forehead - *'probably* Thursday. If in doubt, ring the office.'

I always tried to avoid these exchanges and felt like peeing in my trousers whenever I accidentally witnessed one. But in fairness it wasn't the sort of thing you could actually get yourself into a state about. If only mother minded more. Surely, I felt, she must spend *some* time wondering when he would start arriving on Saturday morning instead of Friday night, start leaving on Sunday night instead of Monday morning, when his weekend with the family would suddenly and irreversibly become his day with the children.

I packed - crucial juvenilia, plenty of paperbacks, and some clothes - then looked round the house for people to say goodbye to.

Mother was still asleep, and Samantha had gone to stay with a friend of hers. The study was empty so I wandered through the dusky passages calling out to my father, but there was no reply. Sebastian, being fifteen, was probably making eyes at his bedroom ceiling. There remained one brother.

Valentine was in the attic playroom, knee-deep in a metropolis of Scalextric, dicing model sports-cars. I said I was going and told him to give my love to everyone, but he couldn't hear me. I left a note on the hall table, and crept off.

Seven twenty: London

Now I look round my room and it seems a companionable place to be - what with the two wine bottles, the subdued lighting, the listless but reassuring presence of paper and books. *Highway's London,* one of my note-pads, has it that I found the room 'oppressive, sulky with the past, crouching in wan defiance as I turned to look at it' on that September Sunday. My word.