Today

Today

David Miller

'It was as if all the hopeful madness of the world had broken out to bring terror upon her heart, with the voice of the old man shouting of his trust in an everlasting to-morrow.'

JOSEPH CONRAD

Atlantic Books
London

First published in Great Britain in hardback in 2011 by Atlantic Books,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 84887 605 7

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

For my wife
Kate,

and for our sons
Freddie and Billy,
with all my love

and because of the memory of my father
Jock

'Stay near to me, and I'll stay near to you'

JAMES FENTON

'Perhaps, if we die of anything, we die
Of distance'

JOHN BURNSIDE

Dramatis Personae

Lilian Hallowes, 54, a 'typewriter'

Audrey Vinten, 25, a housekeeper, formerly a nurse and a companion for Jessie

George Bell, 41, the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral

Richard Curle, 41, a journalist, a friend of the family

Charles Vinten, 24, a handyman and chauffeur

An unknown telegraph boy

Jessie Korzeniowska, 51, a mother, a sister, a cookery writer, a writer's wife, an 'invalid'

Arthur Foote, 29, a manservant

Baxter, mid-20s, a junior doctor, probably from Aberdeen

Scallywag ('Scally'), 77 (or perhaps 84), a family pet (canine)

John Korzeniowski, 18, a student, latterly an architect

Percy Sneller, 31, a chauffeur

Borys Korzeniowski, 26, a war veteran, car mechanic, a son, a father

Joan King, 30, a mother, soon to be separated from her 'husband'

Philip, ½ , an infant, their son

JC, 66, a seaman, a writer, a husband and father, a dying man, a corpse

Douglas Reid, 29, a doctor

———

Jimmy and Clara du Bois, American aristocrats in their mid-40s, friends of John and Nancy Dowell of Branshaw Teleragh

Walter Ashton-Gwatkin, 63, the Rector of Bishopsbourne, the Korzeniowskis' next-door neighbour

Nancy Ashton-Gwatkin, 56, the Rector's wife

Charles Lyons, 46, an undertaker

———

Albert George, 47, Jessie's brother

Walter George, 45, another brother

Florence Penson, 53, one of Jessie's surviving sisters

Jane George (née Nash Sex), 77, Jessie's mother

Edmund Sheppard, 52, a priest

Anthony Milton, a younger priest

Ralph Wedgwood, 50, JC's executor, a cousin of the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams

Albert Tebb, 61, a doctor

Gontran Goulden, 28, a stationer and vanity publisher

Alice Rothenstein, 57, formerly an actress (stage name 'Alice Kingsley')

Edward Garnett, 56, a publisher's reader, later a critic, married to a translator

Robert Cunninghame Graham, 72, a former MP, a socialist, a writer, a traveller, a friend

Georges Jean-Aubry, 42, a friend from France

Edward Raczyński, 33, the Polish Ambassador, much later the 4th President of Poland in exile (1979–1986)

Fred Arnold, late 30s, to be found in the evening in a public house, latterly a letter writer

John Sheridan Zelie, 58, a Methodist chaplain, an American

A gravedigger of indeterminate age, a colleague of Albert Smith

José Altamirano, 78 or so, a funeral crasher from Colombia, now living in Barcelona

Today

Saturday, 2 August

LILIAN HALLOWES was an unhurried, fastidious woman in her mid-fifties who was used to doing what she had been told to do. For this reason amongst others, she was held in high regard. Few noticed her; she was shrouded from most of them by a shawl of gossip, which told all of them nothing. She was happy not to be known.

Those who really knew her would not have been surprised when she placed his notebook in her suitcase last. The act was unconscious, a professional rite. Lilian locked both catches on the case before lifting it from her bed, leaving a decreasing impression on the pale, freshly laundered cream linen of the counterpane. She then looked up to stare at the ceiling, imagining his eyes. She smiled, a vague sense of relief becoming her, her arms held up behind her

head to cup the bun of her hair before she checked everything was in place, as she continued to picture his dimmed, grey-green pupils seeing the sky from her bedroom. Lilian imagined hearing one of his more withering comments about the damp patch on the ceiling corner above where she slept. He could never come to this room, or this house, with her. Instead she remembered their hours in hotels, in his agent's office, his study, the delighted time spent at his side listening to that voice.

She had woken that morning earlier than she usually did, anxious at the possibility of missing her train, but Lilian had also admitted to herself she was unusually eager for this visit. She was looking forward to seeing him again, as she always had, always would. Lilian began to feel he might almost be with her now. Having been away for over a month, she was keen to get back into their routine. They had so much to catch up on – there would be much to say: and she would write it all down. There was so much work to be done.

Lilian did not realize she had pocketed her own notebook in her cardigan until she felt it there with her writing hand. There was never any rough strife in her turning his words into anything, just the vast eternity waiting for them, a rhyme she kept alive in

her head. She stood by her bed now and checked her bag again.

Lilian wrote *everything* down. She had ink, paper, pencils, ribbons and carbon paper. She had packed the typed-up replies, together with the accompanying letters, holding up each item as if for his approval.

The other things contained in her case – save stationery, weekend clothes and changes of underwear, her wash bag and a pair of slippers – were all gifts for others: a tin of foie gras for his wife (Mrs C. enjoyed her food), some French cigarettes for 'himself', Belgian chocolates for the Vintens and the other guests and a jar of truffles for the cousins she would be staying with, all rolled tight in one of her most durable, more colourful skirts. Lilian had crammed enough for the long weekend into the dead-leaf-brown valise, knowing both that she could not include all she needed and yet she would somehow bring too much. 'You *are* an inveterate overpacker,' he had smilingly observed of her once. She could not disagree, and was particularly tickled at being found out. 'Like me,' he confessed.

Lilian had not found a book to read for the weekend, which troubled her somewhat, but she reasoned there might well be something to pick up at the station and there would always be something to borrow at the house.

She checked her own slim notebook again, where she jotted all her own notes, and nodded to herself – or it – ticking things off. She had not yet forgotten to buy John a gift for his birthday and planned to remedy that in Canterbury, although shopping on a Saturday was never her ideal.

There was an hour before her train. She jiggled herself into her overcoat, a dark lime tweed (an unsuccessful stab at style she had bought herself in too much haste, as a birthday present four years before) and she then slipped the notebook into its right-hand pocket, abruptly propelled to leave, to collect her matching hat, bag and umbrella, to shut the door behind her, double lock it and go.

She would not be late for a train.

Lilian, habitually over-prepared, had made the last part of this journey countless times. The ticket never took long to purchase, nor the platform to locate. What took up time was other people: the man at the wrong platform, the tourist with the wrong money, the mother with a toddling child and a suitcase shuddering at a speed which made Lilian smile at that word. The compartment was always trickier to choose because Lilian needed at least two people there with her: she avoided empty carriages.

She did not really enjoy the ride on any train and would spend most of the time looking out at the fields, at the blinkingly bright golden yellow squares of wheat, at horses pulling hay bales or men in fields, water glittering in flashes on ponds or streams; all this was glimpsed through leafy trees and, more recently, in the gutters where cars stuttered down bumpy tracks, or when the carriage would seem to be in some sly competition with a motor on a road. She knew she would think – and would try not to think – of that other carriage nineteen years ago, with its seats soaked from her brother's blood, the unspent cartridges. Her loss could never be erased: the echo of that journey resounded endlessly for her.

The dead live longer than you think, Lilian remembered someone saying, not for the first time.

Light drizzle misted the compartment windows, a change from the torrential rain of the early morning and the night before. Lilian gazed away from what view there was and instead looked ahead at the man reading in the seat opposite. He was casually dressed, in an olive-green moleskin suit, pink shirt, neat silk paisley cravat, and round wire glasses. His stupidly light overcoat lay wilted at his side. He was, perhaps, her dead brother's age. His umbrella's tip now dribbled a shivering pool of water on the

compartment's floor. The man was absorbed by whatever it was he was reading and had not looked up when Lilian had entered the compartment. She thought this slightly unusual until she inwardly admitted she would have done the same.

When travelling, Lilian often distracted herself by guessing how strangers led their lives: where they worked, what they dreamt, who they loved. She had learnt this game from JC when he observed strangers reading in public. She would speculate what book it might be: was this fellow opposite her a Henty or Cotterell or Sax Rohmer enthusiast, or might his taste lean towards something more sophisticated – Stevenson perhaps, even Wells? Occasionally she would read a page over someone's shoulder and take small pride when she could identify the novel in question. She endlessly hoped to read words she had read before, perhaps even the ones she had typed down first and seen before the author.

Lilian looked out of the window at the fields, the green smudges of trees flanking the embankments as they raced by. Watching them at this speed was like seeing solid waves. From the compartment window, they rose and ebbed, from thickets and trees through to flat ground, dipping towards the Medway, the lush land flying by her side like the sea itself. Then Lilian

watched the Cathedral and the Castle as the train crawled towards Rochester, slowing as it crossed the bridge from Strood.

Her silent companion opposite gently closed his book and stood uncertainly. He turned and placed the book on the seat beside him as he shrugged himself into his overcoat, his back to her as he maintained his balance against the changing movement of the train.

She recognized the book's dust jacket instantly. Lilian had noticed it in Bumpus' the other day and had been half-tempted to buy the novel then but held herself back in the hope the publishers might have sent a copy to Oswalds – she might read it there, she thought.

What happened next surprised Lilian.

The reader had picked up his hat and put it on before lifting his case from the railed rack above. He slid open the door to the carriage passage. He fumbled in his pockets for keys. He checked his fob watch, and tucked the thing back into a waistcoat pocket, its brass chain dangling. He left the compartment; he did not look back.

His book sat in front of her. Lilian took this in. Somewhere in her head she heard the words *a glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.*

Lilian was surprised that, so far, she had done nothing, said nothing. Then she leant over and briskly picked up the book, placing it beside her. She purposely looked the other way, through the greasy pane, watching the travellers on the far platform huddling for cover, heaving rain rattling the roof and streaming down the glass. Outside, puddles seemed to simmer like the surface of a stockpot. She heard the compartment door slide shut, followed by the bang of the carriage door, and then a whistle, her heart thumping as the train juddered forward. She turned her head and looked down.

The book was still there, obviously.

Lilian rarely acted badly, but she was smiling to herself now. The train was moving away from the station. She looked out onto the platform, to see the man in his overcoat and hat, clutching his case whilst attempting with difficulty to raise his umbrella in the wind. She said to herself with a throb of bewildered excitement, *I am almost a thief.*

The book had been left behind. She could not be caught. What surprised and excited Lilian more than her crime was its promise of *words*. She took the book, slipped off the jacket that had concealed bright red boards beneath, opened it and read the wonder of a first sentence:

Except for the Malabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary.

*

The invitation, when it came, had been a surprise.

John had written to Miss Hallowes from France that he would be arriving back at Oswalds that weekend for the rest of the summer holiday, and she had replied that her Bank Holiday weekend was being spent near Canterbury.

Oh well, Miss H., in that case I shall ask you to my party, he had replied. *Will you come?*

She had smiled as she read his words and shook her head, holding a hand up to the back of her neck. She could almost hear him.

I shall be with my cousins near Harbledown, and then I am due at Oswalds after the weekend holiday, she wrote in reply. *Your parents will not wish me hanging around, especially on <u>your</u> day. And my being there will only make your father think of work.*

John started his reply, *Don't be such a* … but the sentence trailed off. He crossed it out and wrote instead,

The place will be stuffed with the usual sorts. Let's face it, they will hardly remember it is my birthday unless you are there to remind them.

Lilian could not comment on this, not knowing if she should agree with John, or deny what was true. He went on: *I'm going to ask them anyway.*

He had, which led to awkwardness.

That Thursday evening Lilian had walked down Lee High Road and took the tram down to the Black Horse and Harrow on Rushey Green. She was sipping her ginger beer in the quiet corner when the landlord called her.

The operator connected them and Lilian said to Audrey Vinten,

'I wanted to check the arrangements for next Tuesday,' shouting to the telephone.

'Mrs C. is only just home and we have yet to make plans, but we were expecting you after the holiday, for lunch then, yes?'

Lilian could hear the tone was softer than the words – had Audrey written them down?

Lilian broke in, 'John mentioned his birthday, and a party.'

'The house will be too busy that we—' Audrey was still talking loudly into her 'phone piece but there were crackles. Lilian guessed Audrey might be being

overheard and Lilian knew by whom. 'This line is bad, Lilian, sorry. It's bad. I can hear *you*.'

'I can hear you too,' Lilian said.

'Mr Curle will be staying, and Borys is expected with … with … with his wife and the new baby, as well as John. You could do your usual and bed down in his room, but – he *will* be eighteen – the house will be full,' and Audrey laughed some kindly scream. That part had not been rehearsed.

So it was not a 'no' as such and though it came to much the same thing, Lilian took no offence.

Audrey filled the crackling void: 'We shall see you on the 5th,' and then, softly, so Lilian had to hold the earpiece closely to her head, 'Charley and I look forward to seeing you – you know that.'

Lilian heard the click of a lost connection. The operator confirmed the call had been finished and was there anything else she needed? Lilian did not respond. She replaced the receiver and walked away, leaving her half-filled glass on the bar, closing the door to the pub quietly behind her.

The following afternoon, just before lunch, Lilian was at the small table in her kitchen preparing a ham sandwich, reading a leader in the newspaper about the imminent anniversary of the invasion of Belgium when the second post arrived.