



## Majdanek

*The passage deals with Jeremy and Jenny's visit to the concentration camp of Majdanek in Poland; it shows McEwan's fascination with the past and its inescapable influence on the present.*

Ian McEwan  
**Black Dogs**  
(1992)

Part III

At the beginning of our second week Jenny **astounded** me by asking me to accompany her to the town of Lublin, one hundred miles away. She wanted to visit the concentration camp of Majdanek in order to take photographs for a friend who was writing a book. [...] She explained that she had never visited a concentration camp before and preferred to go with someone she could think of as a friend. As she arrived at this last word she brushed the back of my hand with her fingers. Her touch was cool. I took her hand and then, because she had taken a **willing** step towards me, I kissed her. It was a long kiss in the gloomy, un-peopled emptiness of the hotel corridor. At the sound of a door handle turning we stopped and I told her that I would gladly go with her.

[...] The kiss, the feel of it, the extraordinary fact of it, the expectation of another, and of what lay beyond, had preoccupied me for twenty-four hours. But now, as we headed<sup>1</sup> out through the drab outskirts<sup>2</sup> of Warsaw, conscious of our destination, this kiss receded<sup>3</sup> before us. We sat well apart on the back seat of the Lada<sup>4</sup> and exchanged basic information about our lives. This was when I learned that she was the daughter of Bernard Tremaine whose name I vaguely knew from radio programmes and his biography of Nasser<sup>5</sup>. Jenny talked about her parents' estrangement and her difficult relations with her mother who lived alone in a remote place in France and who abandoned the world in pursuit of<sup>6</sup> a life of spiritual meditation. At this first reference to June I was already curious to meet her. I told Jenny about my parents' death in a car accident when I was eight, and growing up with my sister Jean and my niece Sally to whom I was still a kind of father, and how adept<sup>7</sup> I was at moving in on other people's parents. I think that even then we joked about how I might insinuate myself into the affections of Jenny's **prickly** mother.

[...] It was snowing lightly when we arrived. We took the advice of Polish friends and asked to be **dropped** in the centre of Lublin and set out from there. I had not fully understood how close the town was to the camp that had consumed all its Jews, three-quarters of its population. They lay side by side, Lublin and Majdanek, matter and anti-matter. We stopped outside the main entrance to read a sign which announced that so many hundreds of thousands of Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, French, British and Americans had died here. It was very quiet. There was no one in sight. I felt a momentary reluctance to enter. Jenny's whisper startled me<sup>8</sup>.

'No mention of the Jews. See? It still goes on. And it's official.' Then she added, more to herself, 'The black dogs.'

These last words I ignored. As for the rest, even discounting the hyperbole<sup>9</sup>, a residual truth was sufficient to transform Majdanek for me in an instant from a monument, an honourable civic defiance<sup>10</sup> of oblivion, to a disease of the imagination and a living peril, a barely conscious connivance<sup>11</sup> with evil. I linked my arm through Jenny's and we went on in, past the outer fences<sup>12</sup>, past the guardroom which was still in use. On its doorstep stood two full bottles of milk. An inch of snow was the latest addition to the camp's obsessive **neatness**. We walked across a no-man's-land, and let our arms drop to our sides. Ahead were the watchtowers, squat huts on stilts<sup>13</sup> with steeply pitched roofs<sup>14</sup> and shaky wooden ladders; they commanded a view between the double inner fence. Contained by this, the huts, longer, lower and more numerous than I had imagined. They filled our horizon. Beyond them, floating free against the orange-white sky, like a dirty tramp steamer with a single stack<sup>15</sup>, was the incinerator. We did not speak for an hour. Jenny read her instructions and took the photographs. We followed a party of school children into a hut where wire cages<sup>16</sup> were **crammed** full of shoes, tens of thousands of them, flattened and curled<sup>17</sup> like dried fruit. In another hut,

- 1 we headed. Ci dirigevamo.
- 2 drab outskirts. Tetra periferia.
- 3 receded. Si allontanò, indietreggiò.
- 4 Lada. Marchio di automobili russo. Spesso nell'Est Europa i taxi sono vetture Lada.
- 5 Nasser. Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-70), leader politico egiziano.
- 6 in pursuit of. Alla ricerca di.
- 7 adept. Incline.
- 8 startled me. Mi fece trasalire.
- 9 even discounting the hyperbole. Pur non considerando l'iperbole.
- 10 defiance. Sfidà.
- 11 a barely conscious connivance. Una complicità appena consapevole.
- 12 fences. Recinti.
- 13 squat huts on stilts. Tozze palafitte.
- 14 steeply pitched roofs. Tetti spioventi.
- 15 tramp steamer ... stack. Nave da carico con un solo funaiolo.
- 16 wire cages. Gabbie metalliche.
- 17 flattened and curled. Piatte ed arricciate.



50 more shoes, and in a third, unbelievably, more, no longer caged, but spilling<sup>18</sup> in their thousands across the floor. I saw a hobnail boot<sup>19</sup> beside a baby shoe whose nursery lamb still showed through the dust. Life turned to **tat**. The extravagant numerical scale, the easy-to-say numbers – tens and hundreds of thousands, millions – denied the imagination its proper sympathies, its rightful grasp of the suffering, and one was drawn insidiously to the persecutors' premise, that life was cheap, junk<sup>20</sup> to be inspected in heaps<sup>21</sup>. As we walked on, my emotions died. There was nothing we could do to help. 55 There was no one to feed or free. We were **strolling** like tourists. Either you came here and despaired, or you put your hands deeper into your pockets and gripped<sup>22</sup> your warm loose change<sup>23</sup> and found you had taken one step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare. This was our inevitable shame, our share in the misery. We were on the 60 other side, we walked here freely like the commandant once did, or his political master, poking<sup>24</sup> into this or that, knowing the way out, in the full certainty of our next meal.

After a while I could no longer bear the victims and I thought only of their persecutors. We were walking among the huts. How well they were constructed, how well they had lasted. Neat paths joined each front door to the track we were on. The 65 huts stretched so far ahead of us, I could not see to the end of the row<sup>25</sup>. And this was only one row, in one part of the camp, and this was only one camp, a smaller one by comparison. I sank into inverted admiration, **bleak** wonder; to dream of this enterprise, to plan these camps, to build them and take such pains, to furnish, run and maintain them, and to marshal<sup>26</sup> from towns and villages their human fuel<sup>27</sup>. Such energy, such 70 dedication. How could one begin to call it a mistake?

We met up with the children again and followed them into the brick building with a chimney. Like everyone else, we noted the maker's name on the oven<sup>28</sup> doors. A special order promptly<sup>29</sup> **fulfilled**. We saw an old container of hydrogen cyanide<sup>30</sup>, Zyklon B, supplied by the firm of Degesch. On our way out Jenny spoke for the first 75 time in an hour to tell me that in one day in November 1943 the German authorities had machine-gunned<sup>31</sup> thirty-six thousand Jews from Lublin. They made them lie in gigantic graves and slaughtered them to the sound of amplified dance music. We talked again of the sign outside the main gate, and its omission.

80 'The Germans did their work for them. Even when there are no Jews left, they still hate them,' Jenny said.

Suddenly I remembered. 'What was it you said about dogs?'

'Black dogs. It's a family phrase, from my mother.' She was about to explain more, then she changed her mind.

85 We left the camp and we walked back into Lublin. I saw for the first time that it was an attractive town. It had escaped the destruction and post-war building that disfigured Warsaw. We were on a steep street of wet cobbles<sup>32</sup> which a brilliant orange winter sunset had transformed into knobs<sup>33</sup> of gold. It was as though we had been released from long captivity, and were excited to be part of the world again, of the ordinariness of Lublin's unemphatic rush hour. Quite unselfconsciously, Jenny held my arm and 90 swung her camera loosely on its strap<sup>34</sup> as she told me a story about a Polish friend who came to Paris to study cooking.

18 **spilling**. Sparse.

19 **hobnail boot**. Scarpone chiodato.

20 **junk**. Avanzo, rifiuto.

21 **heaps**. Mucchi.

22 **gripped**. Stringevi.

23 **loose change**. Spiccioli.

24 **poking**. A ficcare il naso.

25 **row**. Fila.

26 **marshal**. Disporre in ordine, smistare.

27 **fuel**. Carburante.

28 **oven**. Forno.

29 **promptly**. Prontamente.

30 **hydrogen cyanide**. Acido cianidrico.

31 **had machine-gunned**. Avevano mitragliato.

32 **a steep ... cobbles**. Una ripida stradina di acciottolato umido.

33 **knobs**. Pomelli, protuberanze.

34 **swung ... on its strap**. Lasciò dondolare liberamente la macchina fotografica dalla tracolla.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY**

**1 READ** the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 left .....
- 2 surprised .....
- 3 rubbish .....
- 4 carried out .....
- 5 touchy, irritable .....
- 6 bare, cold .....
- 7 order, cleanliness .....
- 8 walking pleasantly .....
- 9 spontaneous .....
- 10 stuffed, filled .....

**> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT**

**2 READ** the text again and pick out information about where the concentration camp is situated.

**3 EXPLAIN** the relationships between the different characters mentioned.

**4 READ** the first two paragraphs and write down

- the reason why Jenny wants to visit Majdanek;
- if she has already been there;
- Jeremy's reaction to the invitation;
- how they get to Majdanek;
- what they talk about while going there.

**5 LIST** the information about Bernard and June. Then answer the questions below.

- Bernard: .....
  - June: .....
- What impression do you get about them? What visions of life do they seem to embody?

**6 FOLLOW** Jeremy's and Jenny's steps from the entrance to the exit of the camp and note down what they see. Then in your own words explain what each of these things was for.

**> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

**7 CONSIDER** the use of personal pronouns and say from whose point of view the story is told. How does this affect your response as a reader?

**8 MARK** the lines where Jeremy's narration is broken by dialogue. What function do you think these interruptions have?

**9 FOCUS** on the narrator's reactions before, during and after the visit to the camp.

- 1 Highlight the words and phrases which convey them.
- 2 Now write a short paragraph to explain the impact of this experience on the development of Jeremy's awareness.

**10 WRITE** down the phrase the narrator uses to define the function of the camp and its connection with the surroundings (lines 25-30). Then discuss its meaning.



**11 IDENTIFY** the poetic devices (symbols, metaphors, similes) the narrator employs in the description of the camp and explain their connotation.

**12 UNDERLINE** words and phrases referring to quantity and number. To what effect does the narrator use them?

**13 GO** through lines 55-70 and point out the use of satire.

- 1 What kind of identification is suggested by the narrator?
- 2 Point out the repetitions and their effect.
- 3 What is the implied meaning of the last three sentences?
- 4 What do you think McEwan's aim is in using this technique?

**14 DISCUSS** the symbolical meaning of the black dogs in Jenny's remarks.

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➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

**15 DISCUSS** the following points.

- 1 Do you agree that people should regard concentration camps as monuments, as 'an honourable civic defiance of oblivion', or do you think we should forget and just think of the future?
- 2 In the last pages of the novel, McEwan writes about the black dogs: 'these animals were the creations of debased imaginations, of perverted spirits no amount of social theory could account for. The evil I'm talking about lives in us all'. What further dimension, besides that of history, is he hinting at?
- 3 'They will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time'. What events is McEwan referring to? Can you find any link with the passage you have read?