



## The force of adult hatred

*In the following text the narrator, Jeremy, tells about an incident which happened in a French hotel where he was staying and which embodied for him the worries and the loneliness of his childhood.*

Ian McEwan  
**Black Dogs**  
(1992)

Part III

There were three of them, husband, wife, and a seven- or eight-year-old boy, and they arrived wrapped<sup>1</sup> in their own silence, a luminous envelope<sup>2</sup> of familial intensity which moved across the larger quietness of the dining room to occupy the next table but one from mine. They sat with a loud scrape<sup>3</sup> of chairs. The man, cock of his tiny roost<sup>4</sup>, rested his tattooed forearms on the table and looked about him. He stared first in the direction of the Parisian lady<sup>5</sup> who did not – or would not – look up from the menu, and then his eyes met mine. Though I nodded, there was no trace of acknowledgement<sup>6</sup>. He simply registered me, then murmured to his wife, who took from her handbag a packet of Gauloises and a lighter<sup>7</sup>. While the parents lit up, I looked at the boy who sat alone on his side of the table. My impression was that there had been a scene outside the dining room a few minutes before, some misbehaviour for which the child had been reprimanded<sup>8</sup>. He sat listlessly, sulking<sup>9</sup> perhaps, his left hand hanging at his side, his right toying with the cutlery<sup>10</sup>.

Mme Auriac arrived with the bread, water and the barely<sup>11</sup> drinkable refrigerated litre of red wine. After she had left, the boy slumped further<sup>12</sup>, placing his elbow on the table and propping<sup>13</sup> his head with his hand. Immediately, his mother's hand flashed across the tablecloth and delivered a sharp slap to the boy's forearm<sup>14</sup>, knocking it away. The father, squinting up<sup>15</sup> through his smoke, did not seem to notice. No one spoke. The Parisian woman, whom I could see beyond the family, stared with resolution into an empty corner of the room. The boy slumped against the backrest<sup>16</sup> of his chair, gazing at his lap and rubbing<sup>17</sup> his arm. His mother delicately tapped her cigarette on the ash tray. She hardly looked the hitting sort<sup>18</sup>. She was plump and pink with a pleasant round face and red patches on her cheeks like a doll's, and this disjunction between her behaviour and her maternal appearance was sinister. I felt oppressed by the presence of this family and its miserable situation about which I could do nothing. If there had been somewhere else in the village to eat I would have gone there.

I had finished my lapin au chef<sup>19</sup> and the family was still eating salad. For some minutes the only sound had been that of cutlery against plates. It was not possible to read, so I watched quietly over the top of my book. The father was screwing<sup>20</sup> pieces of bread into his plate, mopping up<sup>21</sup> the last of the vinaigrette. He lowered his head to take each morsel<sup>22</sup>, as though the hand that fed him was not his. The boy finished by pushing his plate to one side and dabbing<sup>23</sup> his mouth with the back of his hand. It looked like an absent-minded gesture, for the boy was a fastidious<sup>24</sup> eater and, as far as I could see, his lips were not smeared with<sup>25</sup> food. But I was an outsider, and perhaps this was a provocation, a continuation of a long-running conflict. His father immediately murmured a phrase that included the word 'serviette'. The mother had stopped eating and was watching closely. The boy took his napkin<sup>26</sup> from his lap and pressed it carefully, not to his mouth, but first to one cheek and then the other. In a child so young it could only have been an artless attempt<sup>27</sup> to do the right thing. But his father did not think so. He leaned across the empty salad bowl and pushed the boy hard below the collar bone<sup>28</sup>. The blow jolted<sup>29</sup> the child out of his chair on to the floor. The mother half rose out of her chair and seized his arm. She wanted to get to him before he started howling<sup>30</sup>, and thereby preserve the proprieties<sup>31</sup> of the restaurant. The child hardly knew where he was as she cautioned him in a hiss, 'Tais-toi! Tais-toi!'<sup>32</sup>. Without leaving her seat, she managed to haul him back<sup>33</sup> into the chair which her husband had righted skilfully<sup>34</sup> with his foot. The couple worked in evident harmony. They seemed to believe that by not standing up they had succeeded in avoiding an unpleasant scene. The boy was back in his place, whimpering<sup>35</sup>. His mother held before him a rigid, cautionary

- 1 wrapped. Avvolti.
- 2 envelope. Involucro.
- 3 a loud scrape. Un gran baccano.
- 4 cock of his tiny roost. Gallo del suo minuscolo pollaio.
- 5 the Parisian lady. La signora di Parigi, l'unica altra cliente del ristorante.
- 6 I nodded ... acknowledgement. Feci un cenno col capo, non ci fu traccia di risposta.
- 7 lighter. Accendino.
- 8 misbehaviour ... reprimanded. Marachella per cui il bambino era stato rimproverato.
- 9 listlessly, sulking. Con aria assente, tenendo il broncio.
- 10 toying with the cutlery. Giocherellava con le posate.
- 11 barely. A malapena.
- 12 slumped further. Si spaparanzò ancora di più.
- 13 propping. Sorreggendosi.
- 14 delivered ... forearm. Assestò una sberla all'avambraccio del bambino.
- 15 squinting up. Socchiudendo gli occhi.
- 16 backrest. Schienale.
- 17 gazing ... rubbing. Guardandosi in grembo e strofinandosi.
- 18 hitting sort. Tipo manesco.
- 19 lapin au chef. Coniglio della casa.
- 20 screwing. Intingendo.
- 21 mopping up. Prosciugando.
- 22 morsel. Boccone.
- 23 dabbing. Asciugandosi.
- 24 fastidious. Di poco appetito.
- 25 smeared with. Sporche di.
- 26 napkin. Tovagliolo.
- 27 artless attempt. Tentativo maldestro.
- 28 collar bone. Nuca.
- 29 The blow jolted. Il colpo fece schizzare.
- 30 howling. Piangere.
- 31 proprieties. Convenienze.
- 32 hiss, 'Tais-toi! Tais-toi!'. Sibilo, 'Zitto, zitto!'.
- 33 haul him back. Risistemarlo.
- 34 righted skilfully. Rimesso in piedi con destrezza.
- 35 whimpering. Piagnucolando.



forefinger<sup>36</sup>, and kept it there until he was completely silent. With her eyes still on him, she lowered her hand.

My own hand shook as I poured Mme Auriac's thin sharp wine. I emptied my glass in gulps. I felt a constriction about my throat. That the boy was not even permitted to cry seemed to me even more terrible than the blow that had knocked him to the floor. It was his loneliness that gripped me<sup>37</sup>. I remembered my own after my parents died, how incommunicable the despair was, how I expected nothing. For this boy misery was simply the condition of the world. Who could possibly help him? I looked around. The woman sitting alone had her head turned away, but the way she fumbled<sup>38</sup> with the lighting of her cigarette made it clear she had seen everything. At the far end of the dining room, by the buffet, stood the young girl waiting to take our plates. The French are notably kind and tolerant towards children. Surely something was going to be said. Someone, not me, had to intervene.

I downed another glass of wine. A family occupies an inviolable, private space. Behind walls both visible and notional it makes its own rules for its members. The girl came forward and cleared my table. Then she came back to take the salad bowl from the family and bring clean plates. I think I understand what happened to the boy just then. As the table was readied for the next course, as the stewed rabbit was set down, he began to cry; with the coming and going of the waitress came confirmation that after his humiliation, life was to proceed as normal. His sense of isolation was complete and he could not hold back his despair.

First he shook with the attempt to do just that, and then it broke, a nauseous keening<sup>39</sup> sound that grew louder, despite the finger his mother had raised again, then it broadened to a wail<sup>40</sup>, then a sob on a desperate lunging intake of breath<sup>41</sup>. The father put down the fresh cigarette he had been about to light. He paused a moment to discover what would follow the inhalation, and as the child's cry rose, the man's arm made an extravagant sweep<sup>42</sup> across the table and struck the boy's face with the back of his hand.

It was impossible, I thought I had not seen it, a strong man could not hit a child this way, with the unrestrained force of adult hatred<sup>43</sup>. The child's head snapped back<sup>44</sup> as the blow carried both him and the chair he was sitting on almost to my table. It was the chair's back which cracked against the floor and saved the boy's head from damage. The waitress was running towards us, calling for Mme Auriac as she came. I had made no decision to stand, but I was on my feet. For an instant, I met the gaze of the woman from Paris. She was immobile. Then she nodded gravely. The young waitress had gathered up the child and was sitting on the floor making breathy, flutelike notes<sup>45</sup> of concern over him, a lovely sound I remembered thinking as I arrived at the father's table.

His wife had risen from her seat and was whining<sup>46</sup> to the girl, 'You don't understand, Mademoiselle. You'll only make things worse. He'll scream, that one, but he knows what he's up to<sup>47</sup>. He always gets his way.'

There was no sign of Mme Auriac. Again, I had made no decision, no calculation as to what I was getting myself into. The man had lit his cigarette. It relieved me<sup>48</sup> a little to see that his hands were shaky. He did not look at me. [...] In fact all I said was, literally, 'Monsieur, to hit a child in this way is disgusting. You are an animal, an animal, Monsieur. Are you frightened of fighting someone your own size, because I would love to smash my gob<sup>49</sup>.'

This ridiculous slip of the tongue<sup>50</sup> caused the man to relax. He smiled up at me as he pushed his chair back from the table. He saw a pale Englishman of medium height who still held his napkin in his hand. What did a man have to fear who had a caduceus<sup>51</sup> tattooed on each of his fat forearms.

'Ta gueule<sup>52</sup>? It would make me happy to help you smash it.' He jerked<sup>53</sup> his head towards the door.

I followed him past the empty tables. I could hardly believe it. We were stepping outside. A reckless exhilaration<sup>54</sup> lightened my tread and I seemed to hover<sup>55</sup> above

36 **cautionary forefinger.** Indice minaccioso.

37 **gripped me.** Mi strinse il cuore.

38 **she fumbled.** Giocherellava.

39 **nauseous keening.** Nauseato e acuto.

40 **it broadened to a wail.** Si allargò ad un lamento.

41 **lunging intake of breath.** Faticosa ripresa di fiato.

42 **sweep.** Gesto.

43 **unrestrained ... hatred.** Incontrollata forza dell'odio di un adulto.

44 **snapped back.** Si rovesciò all'indietro.

45 **breathy, flutelike notes.** Flautati sussurri.

46 **was whining.** Piagnucolava.

47 **what he's up to.** Cosa sta facendo.

48 **It relieved me.** Mi fu di sollievo.

49 **gob.** Muso.

50 **slip of the tongue.** Lapsus.

51 **caduceus.** Caduceo (verga alata con due serpenti attorcigliati.)

52 **Ta gueule.** Spaccarti il muso.

53 **He jerked.** Si mosse con uno scatto.

54 **reckless exhilaration.** Ilarità irrefrenabile.

55 **tread ... hover.** Passo e mi sembrò di volare.



the restaurant floor. As we went out, the man I had challenged let the swing door<sup>56</sup> fall against me. He led the way across the deserted road to where a petrol pump stood under a street lamp. He turned to face me and square up, but I had already made up my mind<sup>57</sup> and even as he raised his arms my fist<sup>58</sup> was travelling towards his face with all my weight behind it. I caught him hard and full on the nose with such force that even as his bone crunched, I felt something snap in my knuckle<sup>59</sup>. There was a satisfying moment when he was stunned<sup>60</sup> but could not fall. His arms dropped to his side and he stood there and watched me as I hit him with the left, one two three, face, throat and gut<sup>61</sup>, before he went down.

- 56 swing door. Porta girevole.  
57 made up my mind. Deciso.  
58 fist. Pugno.  
59 knuckle. Nocche.  
60 stunned. Stordito.  
61 gut. Addome.

## LITERARY COMPETENCE

### > VOCABULARY: WORD FORMATION

#### 1 READ the text and find the words deriving from the following.

- 1 quiet .....
- 2 acknowledge .....
- 3 behaviour .....
- 4 junction .....
- 5 appear .....
- 6 outside .....
- 7 continue .....
- 8 lonely .....
- 9 broad .....
- 10 inhale .....

### > COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

#### 2 READ lines 1-89 again and make notes about

- the characters mentioned and their role in the story;
- the parents' behaviour towards the child;
- the child's reactions;
- the narrator's feelings in front of the scene.

#### 3 READ the text to the end again and answer the questions.

- 1 Why did the boy start to cry?
- 2 What did his father do?
- 3 Who tried to console the boy?
- 4 What did the narrator think?
- 5 What did he do at the end?

### > COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

#### 4 FOCUS on McEwan's style.

- 1 Identify the kind of narrator employed.
- 2 Point out how he builds up the atmosphere of the text.
- 3 Where is the climax?



**5 IDENTIFY** the lines which convey the narrator's suppositions about the three members of the family and what is going on among them.

**6 NOTE** down the words that describe the husband's appearance and attitude.

- 1 How is he connoted?
- 2 How does the figure of the narrator contrast with his?

**7 UNDERLINE** the words referring to violence. Why is the boy hit so many times by his parents? Do you approve of their method of education?

**8 READ** lines 62-63 again and explain what is meant by the author.

---

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

**9 DISCUSS.** Do you agree with the behaviour of the waitress and of the narrator at the end of the story? Would you have reacted in the same way?