

# A Morning in the Life of Intelligent People\*

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Mrs. Mostyn lay in bed rigid. She had lain like this all night, while her husband had slept beside her. Now she could feel him waking. She knew that when he did, he would flutter for a moment as if he were a child and then he himself would become rigid. The night before they had quarrelled. They had said unforgivable things. Then Mr. Mostyn had gone to sleep, while Mrs. Mostyn had lain awake rigid. She had been like this for six or seven hours: she did not count the two or three she had been asleep. Mr. Mostyn had occasionally snored and she had wanted to wake him, but she had not, because she was unselfish. Also, she thought, when he woke up on his own, she could hurt him more effectively.

When Mr. Mostyn woke he remembered the night before and he was amazed at having had a good night's sleep. He could feel his wife lying rigid beside him. He knew that she would have been lying like this for hours and would be waiting for him to wake so that she could hurt him. She would let him show some tenderness towards her and then would repulse him. He rolled away and drew his legs up. He tried to work out if he should pretend to be asleep, or if by letting her hurt him quickly he could then be unselfish about it and so could hurt her more effectively later.

Mrs. Mostyn felt her husband curl up and she knew that he was awake and was wondering what to do. She knew that if he made the first move of reconciliation and she repulsed him, then he would be hurt, and all through the day he could make her feel guilty. On the other hand since she was the one who had lain awake all night it was not up to her to make the first move nor at once to accept his advances. She saw no way out. She and her husband often became paralysed in this sort of situation, lying side by side in their different attitudes like the tomb of a dead crusader and his dog.

Everything depended upon who did not make the first move. But in this war of attrition, Mrs. Mostyn knew, economic and diplomatic factors were on the side of men. It was women who were heroic and military.

For instance, there were the children whose breakfasts she had to get before school. There was the mother's help who looked on her as a model wife and whose good opinion she needed. Faced by the appearance of

either of these forces she would have to make a move and then Mr. Mostyn would defeat her. On the other hand there was his need not to be late at the office.

Mr. Mostyn calculated that if he did not shave and pretended to be too hurt to have any breakfast then he could stay in bed ten minutes longer than usual by which time the children would be coming down and would be making demands on Mrs. Mostyn. Then, if she responded to the children, he would have outlasted her in bed; and if she did not respond, he could jump out of bed and make a fuss of the children and thus imply that she was a bad mother. Also he could dash out of the house without any breakfast and ask his secretary, who was pretty, to feed him. Or he could cook a special breakfast himself downstairs. In both cases he would be implying that his wife did not look after him.

Mrs. Mostyn heard her children moving about upstairs and realised that time was running out; she would soon have to move or lay herself open to the attack of being a bad mother. She thought how unfair it would be to be defeated simply because she was a woman; and looked around for a special weapon from her woman's armoury. She might just have time, she thought, to lean over and be tender to her husband and then, when he was vulnerable, to withdraw from him. By this means, since she would have made the first move and been unselfish, she would not need to feel guilty. What she would be doing would be simply to make up their quarrel. So she put her arm round Mr. Mostyn.

Mrs. Mostyn was a very beautiful girl of twenty-eight who had once tried to be an actress. Her career had been interrupted by her marriage. She had short black hair and the ability to make her eyes go liquid. She had long thin legs and a thin body; breasts and arms gentle as a wood-carving. She wore a transparent nightdress to her thighs.

Mr. Mostyn felt her arm coming across him and had an experience as if he were about to be tortured. This sort of thing had happened before: their love-making was a change of battle rather than an alleviation of it. But, as always, he felt desire; and with this the impression that he might after all be immune—that spirits might fight for him as they had done for crusaders. He thought that he might be able to roll over on top of her, take what he wanted, and then leave her without being vulnerable. So he put his hands round her hips and buried his head on her.

She immediately became inactive. She put aside her plan to withdraw and waited to see if he would force her to make love. She did not know if she wanted this—she sometimes thought she did—because then she could

remain aloof and make out he was brutal; also it might really give her pleasure. But she did not know if she wanted pleasure. This might make her vulnerable. But in any case she knew he would not force her, since they were both people dedicated to non-violence. Still, she could hint that it was a fault that he did not. Though if he did, she knew she would leave him. She became confused. She pulled his head from her breast and gazed at him with eyes that were like a waterfall.

Mr. Mostyn, inundated, felt a battle lost but still believed he could win the war. His masculine weapon was endurance; also a mind that could analyze more profoundly their complex motives. He began caressing her; but from a distance, as if she were a puppet. This was one of his pleasures. He put a hand down and found her legs tight shut: looked up and smiled at her brightly. He knew she might want him to take her by force, but then he would expose himself: also, he did not know if he could. He would be safer, as always, in martyrdom. It was she who would then appear to be frigid, and would feel guilty. So he let his hand lie on her and gazed tragically at the bed-spread.

Mrs. Mostyn felt him drifting away, so she opened her legs slightly. She did not want him to go because then he would seem martyred, and she would feel guilty. As soon as she opened her legs he rolled on top of her and entered her.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Mostyn had believed that in sexuality as in everything there should be nothing outside man's intelligence and control and that the aim of sexuality was to produce simultaneous orgasms. Accordingly they had worked out a system whereby they should let each other know of their progress--a language like that of the deaf and dumb, since speech was unsensual. Mr. Mostyn pulled back his head and raised his eyebrows; he saw his wife's eyes closed and beginning to tremble. His own desire grew. He became still. He wondered what she had done about her diaphragm. He should have asked her before they had begun. She usually put the thing in at night, but last night they had not been on speaking terms. He felt angry because he could not now speak to her, and she had not made it clear to him. Neither of them wanted a baby, but she might risk it just to spite him. Her fingers were on the small of his back pressing him. He felt his own orgasm coming. He wanted to cry out that he loved her. He had a vision of strangling her. He decided he would have to withdraw. He became split by emotions which seemed to be tearing him apart like horses. He bared his teeth and shuddered. He wanted to shout against God, like an unbelieving victim.

Mrs. Mostyn had earlier put her arms around him in order to tell him that she was forgiving him. She wondered if he knew she had put in her diaphragm. She had done this the night before because, in spite of their quarrel, she always did what he wanted. But it was too late to tell him now. She also wanted to see if he loved her enough to risk having another baby. Neither he nor she wanted a baby, but if he risked it it would prove he loved her. Her mind was brought back by the pressure of her orgasm starting. Always at these moments something beyond her seemed to take over; she had wanted to attract him and then withdraw in order to remain inviolate; but now what involved her was overwhelming. She clung in earnest; opened her mouth; dug her fingernails into his back. For the moment she loved him; his long spine like mountains. She thought he had finally given himself to her. She said to herself—I will change. Then he withdrew. She could not believe this: she went after him with her hands crying. He was hanging like someone half-way down a rock-face; she could not reach him, his teeth were bared, she felt herself falling. The one small tree on the cliff had broken, she was holding it, her love, but was tumbling over and over. She would hit the rocks on the bottom. She felt her life lost irrevocably. A body sprawled on the shingle.

She began to cry.

He said: "What's the matter?"

He was looking at her as if through a microscope.

At the bottom of the cliff she wanted to stay dead. She could not climb the ice again.

Mr. Mostyn remembered he had wanted to hurt her. He now felt remorse. His own life had rushed out like a bucket into a gutter. He lay on top of her and shivered. They had once loved each other so much. What had gone wrong?

He said: "You gave me the sign."

When she cried her shoulders rose and fell attractively.

He said: "Darling, do look at me!"

He thought that now might be the time to say how much he loved her; that he would never again fight, never withdraw; that they would have more children and he would cherish her for ever.

She suddenly gave him a violent push in the ribs.

He felt as if a spear had gone through him.

She said: "The children."

There was the sound of footsteps coming downstairs. He wanted to remain on top to show his power simply by weight. He could pretend that

her pushing him had made him paralysed. But if the children arrived and found him on top of her then she could make him feel guilty—both he and she believed in Freud. Whereas if he jumped off her and walked stiffly to and fro he might still make it seem that she had done him some injury.

When the children arrived they saw him in his nightshirt—he wore a nightshirt because this was physical—and they rushed straight past him and jumped on the bed. He thought how unfair it was being a man, since although he was the more attentive parent—he was sure of this—the children still went past him and showered love on their mother. He reached for his trousers standing bandy-legged as if in pain. He did have a pain where he had pressed on her hip-bone. The eldest child was a small girl with dark curly hair; the younger, also a girl, was curiously unlike either of its parents, having straight fair hair and a round face. Their mother enfolded them and her voice became gentle as plucked strings. Mr. Mostyn pulled on his trousers: he noted that his wife never used that tone of voice to him. Also when she was with the children she became uncharacteristically physically abandoned: now, as she leaned over to hug them, her nightdress pulled up so that he could see her behind. He wanted to tell her that to do this was bad for the children; but he could not do this in front of them. She was so sensual. He thought that he might say later—Do you have to use the children?—and then smile enigmatically, so that she would not know what he was talking about. Or he could explain that her demonstrations of affection were nothing but her own narcissism.

Mrs. Mostyn climbed out of bed and put on a dressing-gown. The children had clambered all over her and had pulled her hair; it was always the mother, she thought, who had landed with their emotional demands while the father could go quietly to the bathroom. She tried to push the children back upstairs; they ought to be being dressed by the mother's help. But girls were so hopeless with children nowadays, they seemed to have no control. It was true that she and her husband had told the girl that they did not want any strictness, but there must be some way of doing things without all this rushing about in the mornings.

Mr. Mostyn was in the bathroom shaving. He tried to remember the unforgivable things that had been said the night before. They had been having a purely abstract discussion about the different roles played in the psyche by intellect, feeling, intuition and sensation. He had suggested certain preponderances in her—that is, that were likely to be found in the female. He had suggested that women were concerned with intuition

rather than sensation; and to this she had taken violent exception. She had thought he was casting a slur on her sexuality. In a sense he had been; but there was no reason for her to have thought this. It was a man's job after all to analyze and clarify; and it was typical of a woman to take this personally. In retaliation she had attacked him for being an intellectual, on which of course he prided himself, but which in this case she was using as a slur on his sexuality. Whereas it was after all he who always wanted to make love, so how could he be an intellectual? Mr. Mostyn looked into the mirror and saw his bright face with dark curly hair at the sides going silver; his spectacles streaked with shaving soap. The brush rolled off the shelf and fell with a plop into the water. There were some mornings when even physical objects seemed possessed; as if there could be evil spirits.

He noticed in the cupboard above the washbasin the round plastic case in which his wife kept her diaphragm. The case was empty. He realised that she must have had the thing in all the time. He felt a sudden rush of tenderness; she must have been ready for him to make love even when they had quarreled. He smiled. He thought that now he could forgive her. It was up to the man, after all, to use his powers of rationality: he had areas of free will which were unavailable to the woman. And she was so young; in many ways still a child. He thought of her soft body; her eyes like waterfalls.

He thus decided that when he came down to the kitchen he would be cheerful and would talk to the children and would be kind to the mother's help. His wife would have cooked him eggs and he would tell her how delicious they were. There was a shirt he had asked her to wash, and he would thank her. He would take her in his arms and tell her what a good wife she was.

When Mrs. Mostyn arrived downstairs she found a pile of dirty plates from the night before when they had quarrelled. She could not remember what the argument had been about, but she knew that she had accused him of not being sensual. She noticed his shirt lying dirty on top of the refrigerator; she had promised to wash it. She was suddenly sad. She knew that she was not a good wife; she had these moods; he should have married someone more compliant. And it was true that it was she who often did not like his making love. She thought that she would wash his shirt at once and have it ready by the time he came down. She sprinkled some soap powder in the sink and put the shirt in. They had been together such a long time now; ten years; it would be a pity to break it. At the beginning they had really been in love; she had admired his energy

and his loneliness. She had had a small part in a play about the Greeks: he had said he had never before met an actress. He had asked her to marry him almost at once. She determined to make it up to him. She noticed the milk heating on the stove: butter bubbled in the frying pan. She looked round for clean cups and plates. There were none, because of the night before. She would have to take his shirt out of the sink in order to wash the crockery. She screwed the shirt up and laid it back on the refrigerator.

When Mr. Mostyn came down he noticed his shirt where it had been the night before but it seemed dirtier than ever, she must have screwed it up and deliberately thrown it on the refrigerator. He decided that he would stay out late at work that evening; would get in touch with a girl he had met recently and perhaps ask her out to dinner. In the meantime it was essential for him to remain calm and loving. Otherwise his wife could hurt him. He might pick up his shirt with finger and thumb and drop it into the waste-bin. Or he could wait till she asked him if he wanted an egg and then say—Oh no thank you—and boil an egg himself. But it was first necessary for her to ask him—Do you want an egg? Till then he would stand and whenever she came near him would move out of her way with exaggerated courtesy.

Mrs. Mostyn found her husband suddenly in every corner of the kitchen waiting until she almost bumped into him and then smiling as if demented. And this was just as she was trying to get the eldest child off to school. She had been about to ask her husband if he wanted an egg; but now she had to take up so much time circling the table to avoid him. She knew he had seen his shirt and was disappointed it was not washed; but this was unreasonable, because it would in any case have been to wet to wear this morning. She decided to ignore him.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Mostyn heard the children coming down the stairs, this time together with the mother's help. They were about to be trapped once more by their reputation for unflinching courtesy. Mr. Mostyn looked round for something unpleasant to say quick: if he got the timing right, she would not be able to answer him. There were the breakfasts for the children—they could be being given too much or not enough—but it was not clear what she was giving them. He sat and hummed. He did not like the way she turned her feet in when she walked. She had not brushed her hair. She put a cup of milk on either side of him. The children were almost at the door. He said, simply, "You are a bitch," in a pleasant voice, and felt better. He had never said such a thing before. He had at last been decisive. This was a masculine prerogative. He immediately regretted it.

Mrs. Mostyn could not believe it. The children had come in so she could not answer him. She did not want to anyway. She would pack a suitcase and leave that morning. She could not go to her family because her parents lived in Australia. And her bank account was overdrawn. But she could go to Rome, where there was a producer who had said he could always get a part for her. Her husband was lucky that she was such a gentle person, or else she might have done violence to him. To call her a bitch was unforgivable; much worse than violence. She realised she was on the point of tears: might have to go upstairs and pretend to commit suicide. She would lie on the bed with her hands folded and her skin the texture of lilies; people would stand at the foot and stare at her. They would blame her husband for her death and none of his friends would speak to him. The mother's help would leave, and call for police protection for the children. It would be in the papers. There was a tear rolling down her cheek. But she must at all costs prevent the mother's help from seeing this. They had always kept up appearances. On the other hand, it might be better if it was seen. Then he would be shamed publicly.

The mother's help, Janet, whom Mr. and Mrs. Mostyn imagined thought of them as a model couple, in fact did not think of them much at all, since she was a girl of nineteen and Mr. Mostyn was thirty-nine and Mrs. Mostyn twenty-eight. It seemed to her that as a married couple they were always acting and pretending to be cheerful whereas in reality they were getting on rather badly. Janet certainly did not want to think of marriage herself just yet; besides, she was having trouble with her own boy friend. When she had come into the kitchen the morning had seemed much the same as any other: Mrs. Mostyn had had her back to the room and was reading from a cookery book, Mr. Mostyn held a knife and fork above an empty plate and was smiling. Janet had said "Morning all!" and Mr. Mostyn had said "Morning!" She had gone to get her packet of slimming biscuits.

Mr. Mostyn saw that his wife was crying. This was unforgivable, because it was shaming him publicly where he could not hit back. All the unforgivable things of the night before had been forgivable but now she had trapped him. So he had to make it up to her. He had after all once loved her and now she was crying. He felt himself going backwards and forwards across the table like a ping-pong ball. If the mother's help had not been there, he could have gone round the table and kissed her. Why did she want a mother's help? Other wives didn't. He would now be late for the office. Someone had put the daily paper on top of the marmalade.

He looked for something to wipe his hand on. He jumped up. He was going to kiss Mrs. Mostyn. He might still hit her.

He realised he was wiping his hands on his half-washed shirt.

He flung it into a corner.

Mrs. Mostyn had seen him coming round the table and did not know if he was going to hit or to kiss her. Then he seemed to go berserk, and was throwing things about the kitchen. She had been trying to transfer an egg from the frying-pan on to a plate, but she had to defend herself and the egg fell on to a newspaper. Mr. Mostyn put his hands in his hair and his face went red: he was like a judge, she thought, beneath a wig. Then he dashed out of the room, knocking a chair over.

Mrs. Mostyn went to her children and held their heads close. Her face became sharp; her nose delicate above a lengthening upper lip.

Mr. Mostyn had run out of the house to go to the office. He jumped into his car and gripped the steering wheel. In front and behind him were cars parked very close: he could only move out by banging them. He turned the key and the engine revolved sluggishly. He wanted to butt his head through the windscreen. He jumped out and ran to the car in front and tried to push it: it rose up on its springs like a donkey. He pulled at the handle of the door which was locked. He went back to his own car and started it and rammed the car in front: the bumper of his car got wedged. He went into reverse and the car in front came with him: he rammed the car behind. A whole row of cars seemed to go banging backwards and forwards as if in an orgy.

Mr. Mostyn switched the engine off. He thought he might take his wife by the throat and bang the car with her.

A taxi went past with its flag up and a strap round the flag. Mr. Mostyn jumped out and chased the taxi. There was a main road where the taxi stopped. He caught it and stood with one hand on the door: gave the address of his office. The taxi-driver pointed to the strap around the flag. Mr. Mostyn opened the door and climbed in. The driver got out and came round and said "Get out." Mr. Mostyn said "This taxi is not occupied." The driver got hold of Mr. Mostyn's arm and pulled. Mr. Mostyn pulled. They emerged on the road holding on to each other and waltzing. Cars in front and behind hooted.

Mrs. Mostyn had gone upstairs and had taken down a suitcase. She opened drawers and looked at her clothes. She was going to Rome, where there was this producer. She would need trousers and summer clothes and her dress with the frilly sleeves. This was at the cleaners. She sat on the

bed. If she spent tonight with a friend, she could pick up the dress and go tomorrow. In Rome there would be a room hung with fish-netting and spears: a bearded man playing folk songs. There would be women with hair like woodshavings, couples reclining on cushions and smoking. She noticed on the mantelpiece some drawings by her children. They were of square houses with blue swirls coming out of chimneys and windows like crosses. Beside the bed was a bottle of sleeping pills. She had an appointment with the hairdresser that morning. The children were going to the dentist tomorrow. Outside, cars hooted. When Mr. Mostyn came home he might find that she had murdered her children.

She put her head in her hands. She had not felt like this for years. She wanted someone to help her.

She went to a corner of the room where there was a cupboard. Standing on a chair, she reached the top and pulled down a hatbox. Opening it she felt behind loose lining and pulled out a bundle of letters. They were on faded paper with the leaves stuck together like wood. She unfolded a letter and began to read it. The writing was tall and spidery.

I have a terrible compulsion to do as much hurt as I can while I can. I think this is what love is, an attempt to get what you can't and then to destroy it. There's a shred of sanity left which tells you what's happening; but this doesn't help, it only means you can't escape it.

So I want to tell you how much I love you; and that whatever has happened, you mustn't blame yourself. Remember—it has all been worth while.

It isn't our fault that everything works in opposites.

She sat for a while with the letter in her hand; then picked up the receiver of the telephone.

She dialled the number of her husband's office.

Mr. Mostyn had emerged from the taxi and handed the driver a ten shilling note. The driver waved his hand at it. Mr. Mostyn smiled; leaned forwards and stuffed it in the driver's pocket. The driver saluted. Mr. Mostyn ran lightly across the pavement. He held a handkerchief to his mouth which had been bleeding. He paused in the doorway of his office; looked to the left and right. Then he went next door into a post office. At a counter he said "Any letters? My name's Harris." A clerk looked in a cupboard with pigeon-holes. Mr. Mostyn drummed his fingers. The clerk came back with a letter addressed to J. W. Harris, Esq. Mr. Mostyn took

it. When he was in the street he opened the letter, which was typewritten, and read—

My darling,

Imagine a room high in a building overlooking the Borghese gardens, a wide window with red blinds open on to lovers on the grass, a high lovely room with gold and blue cherub ceilings, gold painted doors and mirrors, heavy velvet curtains and a tapestry round the bed, a gilded double bed with an uncomfortable mattress and a thin bumpy bolster, a girl in tatty pyjamas sitting up in it, not happy, not unhappy, typing to someone she fancies.

Mr. Mostyn put the letter back in its envelope; went into a call-box and dialed the number of his home. The number was engaged. He wondered whom his wife could be telephoning.

When he was in his office his secretary brought him a sheaf of papers and laid them on his desk. His secretary was a young girl with a very short skirt and a patent leather belt across her behind. Mr. Mostyn opened the file of papers. There were photographs cut into shapes and pasted on to huge sheets of white cardboard; columns of print down the sides and circles with handwriting in red pencil. One of the photographs was of a young man with white hair sitting on a lavatory; his knees were raised and he was naked, and he had two church collection bags strapped against his chest. A caption underneath said Mervyn Harper by Charleton Dodd. Mr. Mostyn read the column at the side. The telephone rang; he picked it up and said "Yes?" and then "Ten thousand in Germany." He began writing in thick and neat handwriting.

Mrs. Mostyn had dressed and gone out. She thought she would take a short walk before either getting her tickets for Rome or going to the hairdresser. It was a fine day. When she had telephoned her husband he had not yet arrived. She found herself walking close to the British Museum. She went in. She had not done this for some time, although she lived so close to it. She went through the main doors and turned left towards the friezes from the Parthenon. There was a maze of cardboard screens and then the long room with the white light. The sculptures were facing inwards because this was a museum: in their original positions facing out no one had seen them. Everywhere were men and horses fighting; their heads and necks pressed together as if in love. The men and horses were sometimes centaurs. There were bodies without heads; hooves kicking

where thighs had been. The torsos were soft; she wanted to touch them. Notices told her not to. Penises had been broken off leaving holes. There were lines above hipbones like lyres. Once, when he had been lying with her, he had said--You make love like war; like horses on the Parthenon.

In one of the rooms she had come through there had been colossal Egyptian statues of gods sitting smiling.

He had said--There was a moment when the world stopped smiling.

In the long white room a negro had come up and was standing by her.

He had said--Horses and men become inextricable.

The negro spoke to her.

She said to the negro "Yes, isn't it marvellous!"

She thought--They always come and talk to you.

He had said--Then men and horses separate again.

The negro had small pink eyes and a mouth like a sofa.

Mr. Mostyn sat at his desk looking at a photograph of a small thin man bound hand and foot who was being held up by bayonets. The men with bayonets wore American-type uniforms. The man's wrists were pulled up behind him so that he was pressed forwards and bent. The scene was a jungle with thatched huts and an army truck. The man was naked. He was photographed from the back, so that attention was focussed upon his legs and thighs. Mr. Mostyn noticed after a time that the man had no head.

Mr. Mostyn's secretary came in, and he said "Try to get Mrs. Mostyn."

He looked out of the window and saw the narrow and busy street. He thought he might take his wife and their younger child on a holiday soon to Italy. Their elder child, at school, could stay with friends. He noticed his wife coming along the street escorted by a policeman. She was wearing her pale blue leather coat and was carrying a leopardskin handbag. Her black hair was like a helmet. The policeman was walking just behind her. Mr. Mostyn's heart began to thump; he backed away and stood out of sight beside the window. After a time a buzzer went and his secretary's voice said "Mr. Mostyn, your wife is here." He said "Show her in." He found himself sitting behind his desk in the position of a prisoner; his fingertips on the hard surface and his mouth too anxious to smile.

His wife had put heavy make-up on around her eyes. She came across to his desk and leaned with one hip against it.

He said "What is it?"

She said "I'm sorry."

He said "What about?"

She went to the wall and stood with her back to it. She held her hands by her side and gazed at him.

He said "We've absolutely got to stop behaving like this."

She said "Yes." She made her eyes go liquid.

He said "You take things so personally."

He began putting the photographs back in their file.

He said "What were you doing with that policeman?"

He went to the door of his office and locked it. He turned off a switch on the speaker to his secretary. He stood in front of her and started taking her coat off. She watched his fingers as he undid the buttons. Her face was interested, as if her body were being garlanded.

She said "A man kept following me."

He said "Did you get rid of him?"

She said "Yes."

When she was half undressed he took her by the shoulders and led her to a chair. He said "You are so beautiful."

He knelt and pressed his face against her. It was as if he were going beneath water. She looked down. Her face was like the prow of a ship.

He said "At least, we still feel something."

Later he went to his desk and took the photographs out. He looked at them.

He said "Do you ever think of him now?"

She said "Who?" And then — "Yes, I sometimes think of him."