

CHAPTER ONE

There were moments of happiness in the British Museum reading-room, but the body called him back.
GRAHAM GREENE

It was Adam Appleby's misfortune that at the moment of awakening from sleep his consciousness was immediately flooded with everything he least wanted to think about. Other men, he gathered, met each new dawn with a refreshed mind and heart, full of optimism and resolution; or else they moved sluggishly through the first hour of the day in a state of blessed numbedness, incapable of any thought at all, pleasant or unpleasant. But, crouched like harpies round his bed, unpleasant thoughts waited to pounce the moment Adam's eyelids flickered apart. At that moment he was forced, like a drowning man, to review his entire life instantaneously, divided between regrets for the past and fears for the future. Thus it was that as he opened his eyes one November morning, and focused them blearily on the sick rose, three down and six across, on the wallpaper opposite his bed, Adam was simultaneously reminded that he was twenty-five years of age, and would soon be twenty-six, that he was a postgraduate student preparing a thesis which he was unlikely to complete in this the third and final year of his scholarship, that the latter was hugely overdrawn, that he was married with three very young children, that one of them had manifested an alarming rash the previous evening, that his name was ridiculous, that his leg hurt, that his decrepit scooter had failed to start the previous morning and would no doubt fail to start this morning, that he had just missed a first-class degree because of a bad Middle English paper, that his leg hurt, that at his primary school he had proved so proficient in the game of who-can-pee-highest-up-the-wall of the boys' outside lavatory that he had wetted the biretta of the parish priest who happened to be visiting the playground on the other side of the wall at the time, that he had forgotten to reserve any books at the British Museum for this morning's reading, that his leg hurt, that his wife's period was three days overdue, and that his leg hurt.

But wait a minute . . . One of these mental events was unfamiliar. He could not recall any sensation of pain in his leg on retiring the previous night. And it was not, he reflected bitterly, as if he had enjoyed any strenuous physical activity *after* retiring. When Barbara's period was overdue, neither of them felt much inclination for sex. The thought of another pregnancy had a dampening effect on desire, even though they knew the issue must be already settled, one way or another, in Barbara's womb. At the thought of that womb plumping with another life, a spasm of cold terror coursed through Adam's bowels. In a year's time he should, with luck, have completed his Ph.D. and obtained some kind of job. It was essential that they should avoid conceiving another child at least until then. And if possible for ever.

How different it must be, he thought, the life of an ordinary, non-Catholic parent, free to decide - actually to *decide*, in calm confidence - whether to have or not to have a child. How different from his own married state, which Adam symbolized as a small, over-populated, low-lying island ringed by a crumbling dyke which he and his wife struggled hopelessly to repair as they kept anxious watch on the surging sea of fertility that surrounded them. It was not that, having produced the three children, he and Barbara would now, given the opportunity, actually will them back into non-existence, but this acceptance of new life was not infinitely elastic. Its extension had limits, and Adam thought they had now been reached, at least for the foreseeable future.

His mind turned, as it not infrequently did, to the circumstances which had brought them to this pass. Their marriage more than four years ago had been a hurried affair, precipitated by the announcement that Adam, who was doing his National Service after graduation, was to be posted to Singapore. Shortly afterwards he had proved to be suffering from an ear condition which had restricted him to home postings. This had been a source of joy to them at the time, but in gloomy moments Adam wondered retrospectively whether it had been altogether fortunate. In spite of, or perhaps because of being widely separated - he in Yorkshire and Barbara with her parents *in* Birmingham - and coming together only on weekend leaves, they had managed to produce two children during his army service.

They had embarked on marriage with vague notions about the Safe Period and a hopeful trust in Providence that Adam now found difficult to credit. Clare had been born nine months after the wedding. Barbara had then consulted a Catholic doctor who gave her a simple mathematical formula for calculating the Safe Period - so simple that Dominic was born one year after Clare. Shortly afterwards Adam was released from the Army, and returned to London to do research. Someone gave Barbara a booklet explaining how she could determine the time of her ovulation by recording her temperature each morning, and they followed this procedure until Barbara became pregnant again.

After Edward's birth they had simply abstained from intercourse for six months of mounting neurosis. Having managed, with some difficulty, to enter the married state as virgins after three years' courtship, they found it hard that they should have to revert to this condition while sharing the same bed. A few months

ago they had applied for help to a Catholic Marriage counselling organization, whose doctors had poured a kindly scorn on their amateurish attempts to operate the basal temperature method. They had been given sheets of graph paper and little pieces of cardboard with transparent windows of cellophane to place over the graphs, and recommended, for maximum security, to keep to the post-ovulatory period. For three anxious months they had survived. Unfortunately, Barbara's ovulation seemed to occur late in her monthly cycle, and their sexual relations were forced into a curious pattern: three weeks of patient graph-plotting, followed by a few nights of frantic love-making, which rapidly petered out in exhaustion and renewed suspense. This behaviour was known as Rhythm and was in accordance with the Natural Law.

From the next room came a muffled thump and a sharp cry, which modulated into a low whining that Adam attributed hesitantly to his youngest child, Edward. He glanced sideways at his wife. She lay on her stomach, sucking a thermometer. A small peak in the bedclothes further down indicated the presence of a second thermometer. Unable to decide on the relative accuracy of the oral and rectal methods of taking her temperature, Barbara had decided to employ both. Which would be all right as long as she could be relied upon not to confuse the two readings. Which Adam doubted.

Catching his eye, Barbara muttered something rendered unrecognizable as a human utterance by the presence of the thermometer, but which Adam interpreted as, 'Make a cup of tea.' An interesting example of the function of predictability in casual speech, he mentally observed, as he pulled back the bedclothes. The lino greeted his feet with an icy chill, and he pranced awkwardly round the room on tiptoe, looking for his slippers. It was difficult, he found, to limp and walk on tiptoe at the same time. He discovered his slippers at last in his shirt-drawer, a minute plastic doll made in Hong Kong nestling in the toe of each. He hurriedly donned his dressing-gown. There was a distinct nip in the air: winter was contending with autumn. It made him think of electricity bills. So, when he looked out of the window, did Battersea Power Station, looming vaguely through the morning fog.

After filling and switching on the electric kettle in the kitchen, Adam made his way to the bathroom. But his eldest child had forestalled him.

'I'm passing a motion,' Clare announced.

'Who else is voting?' he cracked uneasily. In theory, Adam fully supported his wife's determination to teach the children an adult vocabulary for their physical functions. But it still disconcerted him - perhaps because it was not a vocabulary he had ever used himself, even as an adult. And it seemed to him positively dangerous to encourage the articulacy of a child so precociously fascinated by physiology as Clare. When Barbara had been in labour with Edward, and a kindly neighbour had hinted archly, 'I think you're going to have a baby brother or sister,' Clare had replied: 'I think so too - the contractions are coming every two minutes.' Such feats were the source of a certain pride in Adam, but he couldn't help thinking that Clare was missing something of the magic and mystery of childhood.

'What's voting?' asked his daughter.

'Will you be long?' he countered.

'I don't know. You just can't tell with these things.'

'Well, don't be long, please. Daddy wants to use the lavatory.'

'Why don't you use Dominic's pot?'

'Daddies don't use pots.' 'Why don't they?'

At a loss for an answer, Adam retreated to the kitchen. Where he had gone wrong, of course, was in categorically denying that Daddies used pots. Daddies often used pots. Eighty per cent of the rural dwellings in Ireland had no sanitation of any kind, for example. The correct gambit would have been: 'I don't use pots.' Or, better still: 'You don't use pots any more, do you, Clare?'

The kettle began to boil. Adam suddenly wondered whether he had over-estimated the function of predictability in casual speech. Supposing Barbara had not said, 'Make a cup of tea', but 'Edward has fallen out of his cot¹, or 'My rectal thermometer is stuck'? He hastened back to the bedroom, pausing only to peep into the children's room to assure himself of Edward's safety. He was quite all right - placidly eating strips of wallpaper which Dominic was tearing off the wall. Adam made Edward spit them out and, holding the moist pulp in his outstretched hand, proceeded to the bedroom.

'You *did* want me to make a cup of tea?' he inquired, putting his head round the door.

Barbara took the thermometer from her mouth and squinted at it. 'Yes,' she said, and replaced the thermometer.

Adam returned to the kitchen, disposed of the pulp and made the tea. While waiting for it to draw he

mentally composed a short article, *'Catholicism, Roman*, for a Martian encyclopaedia compiled after life on earth had been destroyed by atomic warfare.

Roman Catholicism was, according to archaeological evidence, distributed fairly widely over the planet Earth in the twentieth century. As far as the Western Hemisphere is concerned, it appears to have been characterized by a complex system of sexual taboos and rituals. Intercourse between married partners was restricted to certain limited periods determined by the calendar and the body-temperature of the female. Martian archaeologists have learned to identify the domiciles of Roman Catholics by the presence of large numbers of complicated graphs, calendars, small booklets full of figures, and quantities of broken thermometers, evidence of the great importance attached to this code. Some scholars have argued that it was merely a method of limiting the number of offspring; but as it has been conclusively proved that the Roman Catholics produced more children on average than any other section of the community, this seems untenable. Other doctrines of the Roman Catholics included a belief in a Divine Redeemer and in a life after death.

Adam put the tray on the floor outside the bathroom, and entered purposefully. 'Come on, you're finished,' he said, lifting Clare from the seat.

'Wipe my bottom, please.'

He obliged, washing his hands afterwards to set a good example. Then he guided Clare firmly to the door.

'Can I stay and watch?'

'No. There's a biscuit for you on the kitchen table, and one each for Dominic and Edward.'

Adam micturated, and considered whether to wash his hands a second time. He decided against it. On re-entering the bedroom, he found Dominic urging his mother to rise.

'Up, up!' screamed the child. 'Dominic, leave your mother alone. She's busy,' said Adam. Burdened with the tray, he was too slow to prevent Dominic from pulling off the bedclothes. Barbara was the Callipygian type, but the thermometer spoiled the effect. Adam interposed himself between Dominic and the bed. 'Dominic, go away,' he said, and thoughtlessly remarked to Barbara: 'You look like a glass porcupine with all those things sticking out of you.'

Barbara yanked at the bedclothes and plucked the thermometer from her mouth. 'Don't be rude. Do you think I enjoy this performance every morning?'

'Well, yes, I do, as a matter of fact. It's like Camel and his pipe. You were both weaned too early. But this latest development . . . It strikes me as a bit kinky.'

'If you don't shut up, I'll break these damn things over my knee and -'

'Have a cup of tea,' said Adam conciliatingly.

'Just a minute.' Barbara entered the readings of her two thermometers in a small Catholic diary. This was not a conscious irony on her part, but Adam followed the relationship between the liturgical year and his wife's temperature chart with interest. He practised a special devotion to those saints whose feast-days fell within the putative Safe Period, and experienced disquiet when a virgin martyr was so distinguished.

'Up, up!' shouted Dominic, red with anger.

'Dominic,' said Adam, 'Clare has got a bikky for you.'

The child trotted out. They sipped their tea.

'I wish you wouldn't use those silly baby-words, Adam.'

'Sorry. I keep forgetting. What was your temperature?' At this stage of Barbara's cycle, her temperature was of largely academic interest, except that marked changes from day to day might indicate that conception had taken place. Another cold wave of fear rippled through Adam's frame at the thought.

'One said 97.8 and the other 98.2.'

'What does this mean?'

'It's down a bit . . . I don't know.'

'Have you . . . You haven't started your period yet?' he asked wistfully.

'No. I don't think so.'

'Go and find out,' he wheedled.

'Give me a minute.'

How lovely it would be if she came back from the bathroom and said yes. How happy his day would be. How transfigured the British Museum would appear. With what zest he would collect his books and set to work . . . But he had forgotten to reserve any books. That meant a long delay this morning . . .

'Eh?' he said, conscious that Barbara had asked him a question.

'You haven't listened to a word I've been saying.'

'Yes I have,' he lied,

'What did I ask you, then?'

He groped around in his mind for a likely question. 'You said, why was I limping?'

'There, you see? I said, "Have you looked at Edward's rash?" '

'I didn't exactly look. But I don't remember noticing it.'

'I hope it isn't measles. Why *are* you limping anyway?'

'I don't know. I think I must have pulled a muscle.'

'What?'

'In the night.'

'Don't be ridiculous. How could you pull a muscle when you were asleep?'

'That's what I don't understand. Perhaps I run in my sleep.'

'Perhaps you do other things in your sleep,' said Barbara, getting out of bed and leaving the room.

Her words did not immediately sink into Adam's consciousness. He was fascinated by a mental picture of himself running through the streets of London in his pyjamas, at tremendous speed, chest out, arms pumping, mouth swallowing air, eyes glazed in sleep.

PYJAMA ATHLETE SMASHES RECORD

Early yesterday morning late-night revellers were astonished by the sight of a young man clad in pyjamas speeding through the streets of London. Herman Hopple, the British Olympic coach, spotted the mystery runner when returning to his Bloomsbury hotel, and having a stopwatch in his pocket, timed him at 1 minute 28.5 seconds as he lapped the British Museum before disappearing in the direction of Battersea. An official of the AAA who was fortunately accompanying Mr Hopple at the time later measured the perimeter of the British Museum at exactly 800 metres. The pyjama athlete has thus smashed the world record, and qualifies for the \$10,000 prize established by an American millionaire for the first man to cover the distance in less than a minute and a half. 'We are very anxious to trace him,' said Mr Hopple this morning.

Barbara's words suddenly formed up and came resoundingly to attention in his mind. *Perhaps you do other things in your sleep.* Could you, he wondered, and not remember it? That would be the supreme irony: to conceive another child and not even be conscious enough to enjoy it. There was that night not long ago when they had come back from Camel's place drowsy and amorous from drinking Spanish

wine . . .

Barbara returned from the bathroom, and shook her head at Adam's hopeful glance. She was carrying Edward under her arm, breech presentation.

'I've been thinking,' said Adam, 'about what you said just now. It's just possible you know. That evening we came back from Camel's. Do you remember, the next morning my pyjama trousers were on the floor and two buttons had come off your nightdress?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Barbara, rummaging in a drawer for a nappy. 'You might not know what you were doing, but I would.'

'It's not ridiculous. What about *incubi* and *succubae*?'

'What about them?'

'They were demons who used to have intercourse with humans while they were asleep.'

'That's all I need,' said Barbara.

'How many days overdue are you?' Adam asked. As if he didn't know.

'Three.'

'Have you been that much before?'

'Yes.'

Barbara was bent over the wriggling torso of Edward, and her replies were muffled by the safety pins in her mouth. Barbara always seemed to have something in her mouth.

'Often?'

'No.'

'How often?'

'Oh, for God's sake, Adam!'

Barbara clicked the second pin shut, and let Edward slide to the floor. She looked up, and Adam saw with dismay that she was crying.

'What's the matter?' he wailed.

'I feel sick.'

Adam felt as if two giant hands had grasped his stomach and intestines, drenched them in cold water, and wrung them out like a dishcloth. 'Oh Jesus,' he murmured, employing the blasphemy he reserved for special occasions.

Barbara stared hopelessly at Edward, crawling across the lino. 'I can't think how we could have made a mistake. My temperature went up at the right time and everything.'

'Oh Jesus,' Adam repeated, aloud. When his own innate pessimism was balanced by Barbara's common sense, he could survive; but when Barbara herself was rattled, as she clearly was this morning, nothing could save him from falling deeper into despair. He could see it was going to be a bad day, of a kind he knew well. He would sit slumped at his desk in the British Museum, a heap of neglected books before him, while his mind reeled with menstrual cycles and temperature charts and financial calculations that never came right. He made a brief mental prayer: 'Please God, let her not be pregnant.' He added: 'And I'm sorry I swore.'

'Don't look at me like that,' said Barbara.

'Like what?'

'As if it was all my fault.'

'Of course it isn't your fault,' said Adam testily. 'Or mine either. But you don't expect to see the Lineaments of Gratified Desire all over my face, do you?'

The entrance of Clare and Dominic put an end to further conversation.

'Dominic says he's hungry,' Clare announced, accusingly.

'Why aren't you having any breakfast, Mummy?' asked Clare.

'Mummy doesn't feel well,' said Adam. 'Why don't you feel well, Mummy?'

'I don't know, Clare. I just feel sick.'

'Ick,' said Dominic sociably.

'I only feel sick *after* I eat things,' observed Clare. 'So does Dominic, don't you Dominic?'

'Ick.'

'Sick, Dominic. Say "Sick".'

'I wish to hell you wouldn't talk so much at breakfast, Clare,' Adam said.

'Don't lose your temper with the children, Adam, Barbara intervened. 'Clare is only trying to teach Dominic'

Adam swallowed the last morsel of his bacon without relish, and reached mechanically for the marmalade. Barbara intercepted him. 'Actually,' she said, 'I feel better now. I think I'll have some breakfast after all.'

Songbirds! A ray of sunshine! Bells ringing! Adam's heart lifted. Barbara smiled faintly at him and he raised his newspaper before his face to hide his absurd joy. An advertiser's announcement caught his eye:

Write the second line of a rhyming couplet beginning:

I always choose a Brownlong chair

.....

— and win a new three-piece suite or £ 100 cash.

Now that was the kind of competition a literary man ought to be able to win. A modest prize, too, which should cut down the number of competitors to a reasonable size. *I always choose a Brownlong chair* . . . Because . . . because . . . Ah! He had it. He read out the terms of the competition to his family.

'*"I always choose a Brownlong chair,"* What about the next line?'

'*Because it's made for wear and tear*' suggested Clare.

'That's what I was going to say,' said Adam, resentfully.

When Adam came to dress, he could not find a pair of clean underpants. Barbara came into the room at this point, carrying Edward.

'I don't think he's got measles after all,' she said. 'Good. I can't find a pair of clean pants.' 'No, I washed them all yesterday. They're still damp.' 'Well, I'll just have to wear the pair I had on yesterday.'

He moved towards the soiled linen basket.

'I washed those, too. While you were having your bath last night.'

Adam came to a halt, and rounded slowly on his wife.

'What are you telling me? D'you mean I haven't got a single pair of underpants to wear?'

'If you changed them more often, this wouldn't happen.'

'That may be so, but I'm not going to argue about personal hygiene at this point. What I want to know is: what am I going to wear under my trousers today?'

'Do you *have* to wear something? Can't you do without for once?'

'Of course I can't "do without"!'

'I don't know why you're making such a fuss. I've gone without pants before.' She looked meaningfully at Adam, who softened at the memory of a certain day by the sea.

'That was different. You know the trousers of my suit are itchy,' he complained in a quieter tone. 'You don't know what it's like, sitting in the Museum all day.'

'Wear your other trousers, then.'

'I've got to wear the suit today. There's a postgraduate sherry-party.'

'You didn't tell me.' 'Don't change the subject.'

Barbara was silent for a minute. 'You could wear a pair of mine,' she offered.

'To hell with that! What d'you take me for —a—transvestite? Where are those damp ones?'

'In the kitchen somewhere. They'll take a long time to dry.'

In the passage he nearly tripped over Clare, who was squatting on the floor, dressing a doll.

'What's a transvestite, Daddy?' she inquired.

'Ask your mother,' Adam snarled.

In the kitchen, Dominic was tearing the morning paper into narrow strips. Adam snatched it away from him, and the child began to scream. Cravenly, Adam returned the newspaper. He looked at the clock and began to get angry at the way time was slipping away. Time when he should be at work, work, work. Ploughing ahead with a thesis that would rock the scholarly world and start a revolution in literary criticism.

He found a pair of underpants in a tangle of sodden washing in the baby's bath. Improvising brilliantly, he pulled out the grill-pan of the electric stove, wiped the grid clean of grease with a handkerchief, and spread out his pants. He slotted home the grill-pan, and turned the switch to High. Fascinated, Dominic stopped tearing up the newspaper and watched the rising steam. Adam stealthily confiscated the remaining portion of the newspaper. The competition again caught his eye.

I always choose a Brownlong chair

Whenever I relax au pair.

Or

I always choose a Brownlong chair

For laying girls with long brown hair.

No, it was worth going in for seriously.

I always choose a Brown long chair

For handsome looks and a price that's fair.

Didn't scan very well.

'Dadda, 'ire,' said Dominic, tugging gently at his sleeve. Adam smelled burning cloth, and lunged at the grill. Ire was the word. He stuffed the scorched remains of his underpants into the garbage pail, burning his fingers in the process.

'More, Dadda,' said Dominic.

In the passage Adam met Barbara. 'Where did you say your pants were?' he asked casually.

'In the top left-hand drawer.' She sniffed. 'You've burned something.'

'Nothing much,' he said, and hurried on to the bedroom. Adam, who had hitherto valued women's underwear on its transparency, now found himself applying quite different standards, and deploring the frivolity of his wife's tastes. Eventually he located a pair of panties that were opaque, and a chaste white in hue. Unfortunately they were also trimmed with lace, but that couldn't be helped. As he drew them on, the hairs on his legs crackled with static electricity. The clinging but featherlight touch of the nylon round his haunches was a strange new sensation. He stood thoughtfully before the mirror for a moment, awed by a sudden insight into sexual deviation.

'Mummy says a transvestite is a poor man who likes wearing ladies' clothes because he's silly in the head,' remarked Clare from the door.

Adam grabbed his trousers and pulled them on. 'Clare, how many times have I told you not to come into this room without knocking. You're quite old enough to remember.'

'I didn't come in. I'm standing outside,' she replied, pointing to her feet.

'Don't answer back,' he said dispiritedly. What a mess he was making of his parental role this morning. Oh, it was going to be a bad day, all right.

Adam's family lined up in alphabetical order to be kissed good-bye: Barbara, Clare, Dominic and Edward (seated). When the principle behind this nomenclature dawned on their friends they were likely to ask humorously whether Adam and Barbara intended working through the whole alphabet a joke that seemed less and less funny to Adam and Barbara as time went on. Adam kissed Barbara last, and scrutinized her for signs of pregnancy: coarse-grained skin, lifeless hair, swelling breasts. He even looked at her waistline. With an immense effort of rationality, he reminded himself that she was only three days overdue.

'How do you feel?'

'Oh, all right. We must try and be sensible.'

'I don't know what we'll do if you're pr-'

'Pas devant les enfants.'

'Eh?'

'That means, not in front of us,' Clare explained to Dominic.

'Oh yes,' said Adam, catching on. 'I'll phone you later.'

'Try and do it when Mrs Green is out.'

Dominic began to snivel. 'Where Dadda going?' he demanded.

'He's going to work, like he always does,' said Barbara.

'At the British Museum,' Adam said impressively. As he closed the door of the flat, he heard Clare asking Barbara if there were any other transvestites at the British Museum.