

## MICHAEL GRADING

*Peter Cowlam*

### I

His room under an icicled gable was only for now an exile—this was his gloom. His evening life was a motionless life, and his eyes were wide—his mind was in a trance.

This was his remove, and here those Oriental disciplines—the discomfort of lotus and half-lotus contortions—had been tried and rejected. Endless cigarettes and hours of introspection were preferred.

His private cataclysm, swirls and eddies inches below a calm, unruffled surface, had taken in routinely and for the thousandth time the distorted ovals, triangles and shadowy little oblongs—a geometer's absent doodle—that when smoothed away curtained out the winter night. It was his ritual at this troubled hour to sit in his chair and watch for the first bright quadrant of

the rising moon—in fact for *anything*—to illumine one low corner of his world.

Sometimes the autonomous elements offered no sympathy, he recalled, and once, on a starless cloudy night he was obliged to stand at his narrow lookout, with folded arms. A discarded butt still smouldered among the debris of his ashtray, whose moulded inscription, *Au Bois de Boulogne*, had long disappeared under successive crusts of ash. Across the street, a connecting scene was re-rehearsed: offstage technicians cued a fuzzy yellow cone of artificial light—it issued from an imitation gas lamp—where a polar shower unleashed itself in an otherwise gentle flutter of snowflakes. The two players entered left. A man in a crumpled hat and long coat with the collar turned up. With him an indeterminate dog—Alsatian or Labrador—sniffing territorially round the foot of that street lamp. Michael unfolded his arms and turned away, having foreseen the inevitable: the cocked hind leg—the right, the left—another confirming sniff—the right leg after all—the warm, steamy jet, the growing yellow hole, the gaping dark wound in the dissolving snow.

He guessed from the pitch of excitement in their voices that tonight's performers were a great deal younger: rosy-faced minors, with woolly scarves, and stripy bobble hats caked in snow—though Michael Grading didn't care to look.

Soon, the first guests would come (nor did he care to predict whom that would be), and that was much to his chagrin. He stubbed out another butt in his ashtray and lifted up the heavy encyclopaedia beside it, already open at 'Suicide.' Nothing much here, where most recent statistics were nearly thirty years old, showing firearms (which he didn't possess) in the United States (where he'd never been) as the most popular means, and jumping from high places (the summit of his college fire escape, perhaps?) ranking low on the scale.

He closed that ancient tome, and in another sudden movement tossed it down among a chaos of technical papers on his desk, then saw when he stood and adjusted his glasses those unwitting Thespians tumbling and sliding home through the snow, scarves all flying. He folded his arms. In a moment he would hear two distant voices—a commanding basso first, his father's, then the reedy, staccato overlay of his mother's. Arctic conditions brought out the gregarious in some.

To his horror, the first of those guests had arrived, careful to plot the one reliable course round the offside of the family car, while at the same time avoiding swipes in the face—a fresh weight of snow laden in the cedar tree. That booming bass was a reverberation in the lantern-lit porch, and was soon punctuated by the stomping and scraping of feet on the grille—then the addition of more voices.

It was time, time to look around, time to find a plausible diversion.

## II

Grading, a devout agnostic, didn't require the complicated paraphernalia of other religions. To him the vicar of God wore holy smiles but Druid gowns, while his choir intoned Satanic chants. In any case the sense of sin was the same. It was easy but deceitful, squatting before a grandmother's antique chest—its deep drawers for a multitude of thick woollies, huge rounded knobs for handles—where in hopeless retrospect he tried to make sense of his despair. Arriving guests looked up, and in seeing the dim rectangle of shaded light under the gable remembered their own student labours.

This was his other country, with its childhood memorabilia, its little symbols and reflections of his early life, now looking more and more like someone else's. He picked up an identity bracelet with a forgotten and now puzzling insignia, *Jtaly*. Yet with it came the recollection of a freer incarnation of himself, where alone or with friends he inspected and mentally mapped each street with its houses, or the woods, the lanes, the churches and outlying meadows that together made the village where he lived. He remembered finding the bracelet in a strawberry field, while he and two others explored the rambling grounds of an ancient house, quaintly

unafraid of its owner, said to be seated in the House of Lords, a man who sometimes appeared in loud checks and a flat cap.

One of his friends, short-haired throughout his boyhood, had an eye for detail, and examined the token. Grading had no time for it, and in another moment sounded his war cries in a tepee frame where runner beans were intended to thrive, wielding an imaginary hatchet. In later years Grading lost touch but heard of that friend through rumours of a stepbrother, how early one morning he drove in a salty drizzle thirty miles to the coast, and high above Hastings attached a hose to the exhaust pipe. The other end fed the saloon through a window. Our driver, going nowhere, switched on. Poisonous gas, according to Michael's dated statistics, ranked closely to hanging, though perhaps not often on a grassy windswept hillock over the choppy grey Channel, in the driving rain. A milkman discovered him hours later, without a note.

Now, that bracelet had lost its charm (a greenish psoriasis had erupted across the silver plate): *Jtaly* had corroded into *Jtcly*, and those once sparkling links were worn to a brassy dullness. In his adult mind, such an article was stubbornly paired with hirsute Latin waiters, or with car mechanics. It slipped through his fingers and fell down collar-like round the buttoned neck of a glove puppet, whose features were those of Punch. No Judy or string of sausages accompanied, so what else? A pair of stuck

compasses, and still attached the yellow stub of a pencil. A plastic protractor, scratched, scored, defaced (listen! was that one of the guests on the stairs stumbling already for the bathroom?). He swept aside those mathematician's tools and gathered up a leather purse—really a tobacco pouch, used for clandestine pipe-smoking—but before dwelling too long on that, his mother had pushed her head round the door.

'They're all here,' she said.

He closed that bottom drawer and lit another cigarette.

### III

The condemned man descending, not so much led but urged on by the executioner, paused frequently on his stairway, not for the obligatory cigarette or sentimental last wish, but for a final appreciation of another world, at all times accessible, if largely prohibited. The steady hum of conversation and occasional hoots of laughter had been audible even in his own territory (he couldn't recall that border passes had been issued), where the interrupted past never properly offered a refuge. Worse was this limbo or no-man's land, where what belonged to the outer reaches he not only heard but was menaced by. He must resume his stride, must turn his attentions away from the portraits and landscapes, graduated up or down

the stairway, where on his present trip the last window opened onto a windy marsh at sunset—its wild geese receding in formation.

Gigantic snowy footprints in a black and orange maze had melted into watery craters, staining the hall carpet. How often while he sat on a low step at the outset of a phone call, the polished receiver held dead-weight over his shoulder, with its pessimistic monotone—how often the archetypal goblins besieging his jaded imagination had swarmed in vain and in every direction over the resistant pile, that bright new path and its promise of emigration, of a cleaner air to breathe and a healthier climate. He took that eventual step, and envisaged on the other side that press of his parents' guests, behind whose party masks expectant faces watched for the tentative revolution of the doorknob, but only seeing for the moment, in the shiny brass, their own kaleidoscopic reflection.

Naturally when Michael entered, that uncomfortable impact was of a slightly different order. The pariah was in fact unnoticed and ignored, and was only gathered in by clammy, grasping hands when his appearance offered a tidy conclusion to someone's flagging conversation. The hum he had heard behind the closed door now billowed up with thick bluish clouds of cigar smoke, and the scent of aftershave and perfume, and unlike the busy little people in the hall he stood for a moment, frozen in the doorframe. He adjusted his glasses, pressing back the bridge with an accustomed

forefinger, and thought about retracing his steps and collecting his cigarettes (discernibly pointless: there were always open boxes scattered around invitingly downstairs, on cocktail tables or mantelshelves—a useful supplement to his student exchequer). He lurched mechanically over the threshold, a skinny, myopic, gangling youth, and on familiar ground took unfamiliar bearings.

The communicating glass doors had been thrown open, resolving the two small reception rooms into one, and where his gaze might ordinarily alight on a patchwork of bubble panes, there was now the relative sensation of depth and space, albeit populated by nodding, empty heads. The furnishings had been pushed more or less at random into the perimeters of these two rooms (the floral, hermaphrodite settee was wedged between its companion male and female, two high-winged armchairs, where no one as yet had thought to sit). In a corner, under a hanging hi-fi speaker, out of place away from the conservatory, a peacock chair had a card pinned to it, bearing the following, curiously, in his father's hand: FOR OLD WARHORSES ONLY!

He struck out for the fireplace where an open box of cigarettes and an ornamental kettle occupied an alcove, but a restraining hand gently clasped his elbow.

'You must be Michael,' someone said.

## IV

Anonymous councils had considered the pale man's life-and-death struggle and granted a reprieve, so that the next hand was not the executioner's on the small of his back, propelling him firmly, without fuss, into a closed circle. Priapus roused himself unexpectedly (a momentary twinge), and Michael reflected on this: that he had never found social salvation in falsified assurances. He assumed that the elegant woman, about his mother's age, but slim and sophisticated, had observed and knew everything about him, and unlike him remained relaxed. One elbow, angled to a seam, enjoyed a happy alliance with the tightly skirted curve of a hip, while the line of her lightly freckled arm ended in a plume of smoke, an inch of grey ash, a cigarette pinked at the filter. The varnish of her nails was a dewy silver. When she sipped her Campari, the same pinkish residue was deposited under the dark rim of her tumbler.

Mistimed advances (reckless Kāma or friendly jackanapes?), acknowledgments proffered in coded silences (the bigotry of Anglo-Saxons doesn't lie dormant long, and eventually solicits one reply or another), and the prompt retreat of a Sanskrit teacher (his presence represented only perfunctory service to social integration), left Michael looking quizzically after the genuine pariah (purportedly in search of a mislaid camera). The grey, paunchy, balding husband—how could she have made such a

mistake?—skirted round that embarrassing hiatus. He said: ‘Dad’s told me all about it, Mike—I *can* call you Mike? What you get up to up there.’ His flabby round face was beaming through a film of sweat, which he wiped from time to time with the melodramatic flourish of a handkerchief (its monogram ‘AH’). On the last, fading cadence he gestured ludicrously with his rolling eyes and devilish brows, meaning Michael’s room upstairs. Michael only half attended his questions—what was an electronic OR gate? what was software, what was firmware? ‘. . . go on, enlighten my wife—she’s fascinated . . .’ But that wife when her mouth went into smoky provocative ovals prompted important, tormented questions of his own.

Somehow the thrusting probes and awkward parries seemed to lose themselves naturally in the hubbub, and he withdrew honourably. They understood only too well the broad responsibility of the host, or in this case, servant of the host. He grabbed almost desperately at that box by the kettle, which now contained the inverted tripod of only three cigarettes (he alone rendered it lame and useless). A cold albino hand offered a light, pushing under his nose in two pinched fingertips the last flaming remnants of a charred match that curled towards the ceiling. When he squeezed his way to the other room where a candlelit buffet had been laid out, the little snatches of conversation he caught revealed the significance of his father’s sign on the chair. Later, he caught sight of the retired major, clutching a paper plate

and serviette, bent stiffly over a bowl of rice and raisins. His thin moustache was clipped severely, leaving a narrow contour between it and the taut upper lip. Underneath the darkish, sagging flesh of his face the high lines and surprising protuberances of a rare bone structure were horribly visible. The major had been ill, and that was clear, and after spinal surgery the physiotherapist had recommended high-backed chairs, without the need for cushions.

## V

After midnight, those child performers were safely tucked up while the hound slumbered, twitching, in the rear of a cold house somewhere. Odd flurries of snow had ceased, but the pavements were frozen, twinkling in the moonlight. A late-night neighbour briskly walking home glanced out from the multiple wrap of a scarf and saw in the merry haven a reddish afterglow suffuse the velvet curtains. A yellow lantern light, still bright in the porch, streaked the icy fingers of the cedar tree. He shivered and shrugged, then thrust his gloved hands deeper into his pockets before hurrying on. The major on the other hand had retired creaking to his chair, and sat assiduously upright with a stiff whisky, listening—as were all the guests listening—to the night's raconteur.

Michael's unease was by now well understood. He was some way back, behind those un-communicating doors, and sat with a mineral water, gazing at the depleted salads or limp lettuce leaves, the chains of tomato pips, the half-eaten buttered rolls, the powdery crusts or waxy rinds littering the cheese board. There was a busy clatter in the kitchen—a hot and steamy place by now—and the slosh of a dishcloth patting the plates and china. His mother, now with her dull brown hair in a mess and her forehead lined with fatigue, appeared sometimes and stacked up plates and dishes precariously ('Come on, give us a hand!'). His father came out too—'Yes, come on, give us a hand'—the sleeves of his starchy new shirt rolled up, his warm pink hands dangling at his sides where a tide of soapsuds slid from his fingers into little pools on the carpet. The shaving rash under his chin and on his neck had been aggravated by his collar, which his son reflected should have been consigned straight from the wrapper to the wash.

He could see in the arrangement of twining candelabra, each with its complicated network of little lambent stubs, tunnels of supernatural light, and through it remembered something he had read or seen on TV. A mother's pregnant, almost murderous agony ended with a Caesarean, where the divine expectation in all she had gone through had raised her consciousness above the delivery table, above the intense theatre lights, and for a moment left it hovering under the flaky ceiling, observing. The assistant

midwife knew the sign, and called: the white-coated doctor came back immediately and led the revival. But this was the mother's farewell, who floated in careless ecstasy and took a last look down: at the arched back of the weary, wakeful doctor thumping her lifeless body (grim, determined resuscitation); at the midwife, ready with a syringe; at the bloody, gory placenta on a steel tray; at the screaming child, hastily swaddled; and out there, through the distorted pane over the door, at her pacing husband, who had been bundled out to the harsh light of the corridor. A helix of autumn leaves whisked her away from this, an impossible world, and set her down again, in tune with a choir, at the gate of a summer village.

'Is it you?' she said, and the old man leaning there in dazzling cricket flannels nodded and smiled. 'Granddad? Isn't it so lovely here!'

He held up a wrinkled hand and, still smiling, told her this was much too soon. 'You must go back.'

And she: 'But this is paradise.'

And her granddad again: 'But what about the children? Who will look after the children? You must go back, go back . . . .' Then she remembered what she had to do, just as the doctor sighed, relieved, and saw the flicker in her distant grey eyes.

## VI

A vast burning sun had reached the zenith of a perfect blue heaven. From where he stood on high ground, where he had twisted round awkwardly and polished his lenses, Michael could see that the major and the raconteur had tottered home for the night. He followed their intertwining prints—two drunken threads looping over the blurred horizon. Over there, where sand billowed up in blinding sheets, a priest in a flying cassock stood at Michael's gate, one hand shielding his eyes. An impostor, or a harbinger, had arrived there first.

The priest appealed: 'Nicola—what you contemplate is treacherous, terrible even . . . .'

The wind dropped. The holy man commanded the elements, if not the human soul: vapours and nether-spirits sank at his sandalled feet. The dust settled. Michael wiped away the fog that had gathered on his lenses again. He pressed forward to the wicker gate, where on a winter night he'd come to claim his ultimate rite of passage. When the other two saw him come, Nicola turned away and replied to the priest.

'I don't need you to tell me,' she said. 'Of all people, I don't need you.'

Michael approached, but did not interrupt. The broad black band in Nicola's sun-bleached hair was a pair of dark glasses, which with a

prohibiting gesture she pushed into service, so remaining at one remove from Michael Grading, behind a reflected sun.

The priest resumed: 'There is so much suffering in that other world.'

'There's suffering in *this* world too. That is our belief.'

'It's what we inflict on ourselves . . . .'

'Then life isn't good,' she said. 'Or isn't right.'

The priest said, 'God gives us life, and he leaves that life to us,' and Nicola said, 'Then God can know nothing, since the outcome rests with us.'

'Nicola, I command you not to go!'

She was wearing her green safari suit. She laced her desert boots and pushed a broad hat firmly on her head. The wind got up again, and bending her whole wiry frame into the swirling, unearthly sand, she opened and passed through the gate, still pressing the hat to her head.

'God forgives. And God *will* forgive.'

Michael followed (for him forgiveness wasn't enough), but the priest restrained him, saying there were things still left for him to do.

'To do! What?'

The priest folded his hands gravely and with his cassock billowing up again (the restless spirit, the advancing storm) summoned his articles of faith. Michael, look: can you really leave when all is in disarray ('Come on, give us a hand . . . .')? That bright sun in the perfect blue heaven began to

slide away, then plunged from its summit, while the priest, who was difficult to hear in the swirls and eddies and whirlpools of sand, assured him that this was not the time in his brief young life for sleep ('Yes, come on, give us a hand . . .'), and faded with a kind of valediction. The fog came over his eyes again, and Michael's limbs and torso twitched. There were crumbs on the cloth where he had buried his head in his folded arms, and it needed to be shaken, though he was lost in a dream, lost in a dream, lost in a dream.

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**Peter Cowlam** is a writer and critic. His brief stint as a commissioning editor saw two issues of *The Finger*, a journal of politics and culture. His poems and short stories have appeared in a range of journals and litmags, most recently *The Liberal*, *Volume Magazine*, *Turbulence*, *Epicentre Magazine* and *The Criterion*. His latest novel, *Who's Afraid of the Booker Prize?*, published earlier this year by CentreHouse Press ([www.centrehousepress.co.uk](http://www.centrehousepress.co.uk)), is a satire on fashionable London life.