

Jackdaw

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I don't myself know how to play bridge, but Jacquie played it skilfully. She built her life round it. Round that and drink and cigarettes. Well, that's an exaggeration, of course. Who would admit to his life being based on that? There were, of course, "human relationships". It makes us feel better to think our lives are based on "human relationships". It makes us feel human! She was a widow. Once she had been more or less happily married, but that was many many years ago. Since then she had been "on her own". She lived alone and she played cards several times a week.

The house was a modest semi-detached situated in a middle-class area of a large provincial town. Jacquie kept it neat, for that's how she had been brought up, and how all her friends had been brought up. It was expected. She was not well-off but she managed to seem better-off than she was. Trouble was, too much went out on whisky.

She was a small, dark-haired person, with sharp features. Once she had been decidedly good-looking, though always with a somewhat affected air that put people off. It didn't put Gerald off though, nearly forty years ago. He was a quiet-spoken, small, neat man, who always contrived to leave the impression that he was hiding something. Not anything discreditable, but a "depth". They made a good couple, quietly going about their business, with an air of secrecy about them, as though hiding a life others might criticize.

But there was nothing to tell about them. No scandal. Nothing.

Jacquie's father had been a provocative man. Short-statured, rather fat, aggressive in manner. You didn't meddle with Morris Coe. Her mother, too, had been a decidedly self-confident woman, with a touch of arrogance even; so it wasn't surprising that Jacquie should turn out a bit "difficult" too. But whereas her parents had made their way in the world, had a secure place in it, Jacquie seemed somehow on the fringes of things. Perhaps it would have been different if she had had children, but she and Gerald were not blessed with a family of their own.

Years slipped by, as they always do, imperceptibly. People doing the same things, talking to the same people, breathing the same air. In a way, not changing. It is Time only that changes, washing over people without their noticing—the tide of Time.

Eventually their clothes wore out, or they grew tired of them. So they acquired others. They could afford it. But it was the same "them" inside. People don't change, though they may think they do. They think, usually, that they have grown wiser, more "mature". It's rubbish, self-flattering rubbish, usually.

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“You little Austrian! You little Austrian!” That’s how Mrs Coe used to go on when her husband annoyed her; for indeed he had been born an Austrian-Pole. And his arrogance she put down—or pretended to—to that. But he blazed at her just the same. And poor Jacquie—Jacqueline, as she was to her socially-conscious mother—looked on with dismay, and often tears. Nevertheless, she inherited, as people often do, some of the same qualities that caused her to suffer so much as a child.

Had Jacquie and Gerald had children it might have been different; they might have changed. Or rather, if not changed, then watched, and watched over, the change in their children; for indeed the child changes into an adult. And this involvement with other lives might have amounted to a sort of change in themselves. For that would have been a form of love, and love forces the mind outside itself. They would have been themselves but without their characteristic self-absorption. They would have been nicer people, perhaps. As it was, it wasn’t children that concerned them, but cards—cards and clothes, cigarettes, and, sometimes only, whisky.

But they had their circle of friends, people much like themselves, only people with children mostly, and with their own circles of other relationships. All these people were spending their holidays from Death in a big provincial English town—eating, drinking, talking, loving, etc. Death happened now and then, usually to the previous generation. They were shocked; they wept; they tried to forget it.

They had an outing, once or twice a year, to the cemetery, where their fathers and mothers, and aunts and uncles, poor Marjory who died at eighteen, and little Peter, lay silently in the earth, with little pebbles or slabs of stone on top, to stop them rising out of their coffins perhaps. The minister had said prayers over their corpses as they were lowered into the grave, and the relatives stood round out of respect. But why should a corpse be respected by virtue of being one, when the living entity was perhaps unworthy of it?

Nevertheless, the officious mourners would leave their “dear ones” in peace eventually, and the dead would have the cemetery to themselves again.

All the birds of the air, the very worms, the grass, and the trees eventually, would die. Everything would be renewed and the dead would be as if they had never been. Even Jacquie. Even Gerald.

Mr and Mrs Morris Coe were already gone.

But the children would go on for a while; and then they too would be gone.

Jacquie sometimes thought of these things. Most of her friends, and Gerald certainly, pushed the thoughts aside, if they should occur. It was enough to have to visit the cemetery now and then.

Jacquie revolved these thoughts but she didn’t bestir herself. She had no thought of being a martyr. Not at all. She would rather contemplate her own unworthiness. It just made her think how awful people were, herself included.

They all watched television of course, and saw films, or even read books; and death was cropping up all the time there. But there it

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was entertainment or information, not something real. Even when the media-people stressed how tragic things were for some people, it didn't really go home to most of their audience, no, not even if it made them dig deep for a charitable donation. It was, Give and Forget, for you at any rate had not ignored the beggar's bowl. But the only answer to the call was actually to (in Christian idiom) take up the Cross, give all to the poor. And even then, you mightn't glory in your action, for that would be to ruin every chance of salvation you might have, even if the poor might still be served.

So she began to have recourse to the bottle, to forget, to make herself happy. And the treatment worked wonders. She was happy; she did forget. Only the spectacle of his wife's inebriation struck terror into Gerald. He knew whither it must lead, as did Jacquie of course. But why save herself? What for? For Gerald? No, she didn't love him enough for that. But no one else knew yet about her compulsion which was not yet an addiction.

But there was a marked improvement in her attitude on social occasions, such as card-playing. She seemed more positive, a little more extrovert, capable of a witty sally now and again. She was better, too, at cards. In fact she became a formidable gambler. She and Gerald took a Riviera holiday on the proceeds.

At first she enjoyed herself, strolling along the Promenade des Anglais, eating "bouillabaisse", drinking red wine, then a "digestif" and a coffee. She and Gerald turned brown through long hours on the sunny beach. But the dread of death encroached even here. Only oblivion could save her from despair, and this she could have quickly with the aid of strong spirit.

It didn't matter if she was drunk in Nice, because no one she knew was there. But she was mistaken if she thought no one there knew her. Nice is too popular a resort for anyone to feel safe from friends or acquaintances in, and though he did not intrude on the couple an elderly man who had known Jacquie's father watched her one day from the other side of a hotel lounge.

But the sun still shone, the sky was blue, the pebbly beach hot and crammed with people doing what people do—laughing, talking, breathing, changing their positions, getting up, walking about, swimming, buying an ice-cream, etc., etc., etc. It was a lovely way to spend time; so long as you didn't think about death. But Jacquie couldn't stop herself thinking about death, unless she was drunk. So she drank, and drank, and drank.

The effect on Gerald was what you might imagine. He was distraught. He was not enjoying his holiday, even if Jacquie was enjoying hers, which she was—when she was drunk. So why be sober? Why, why be sober? For Gerald's sake? Phooey. Let Gerald look after himself. He had the better of it anyway. He wasn't obsessed by death.

Jacquie began to feel vindictive towards him, precisely because he was so much better off than she. He was not obsessed by death. She knew, of course, that she was. She wasn't a fool. Far from it. But then she was right. Death was inevitable and it did make a nonsense of everything, just everything, a person did. So let's forget. Let's

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drink, drink, drink, and to hell with everyone and everything. Jacquie was insufferable.

Of course, people began to notice now. You couldn't miss her, coming in to dinner with a silly supercilious grin on her sharp-featured face, staggering slightly, knocking over her wine-glass.

Happy? She wasn't happy, but she was drunk, and that was better than being sober, which was the normal condition of consciousness, consciousness that was insufferable to a person like her.

But Nice was a city which boasted an excellent casino. Let's go gambling. She watched the roulette ball whizz round a few times, but that was a nonsense too. There was no skill involved, just luck. Well, she didn't think of herself as favoured by Lady Luck, so let's play cards.

But here was some competition. There were professional gamblers here, with card-I.Q.'s of a very high level. She enjoyed the challenge. She lost some and she won some. Jacquie, too, was respected now. It didn't matter if she got drunk—she didn't play when she was actually drunk (though what she had in fact drunk would, by this stage of her alcoholic career, have made most people incapable)—the fraternity cared only about her skill, or luck (for much still depended on what cards Fate dealt you), and her alcoholic excesses were considered, if anything, an addition to her charms. Here, surely, in Nice, at the casino, was her true setting.

Gerald looked on helplessly. The couple quarrelled, but he was hopelessly outmatched by her. He was a mild man, without much capacity for temper. He merely suffered.

But all good things come to an end. The holiday was about to terminate. They had a 'plane to catch. They must pack. There were bills to pay. Thank God! (thought Gerald); for Jacquie did consent to leave. On balance, she hadn't done all that well, anyhow. The competition had been stimulating, but a little overpowering.

So back they went to England, through the blue air, high above the clouds, in the sealed tube that was the aeroplane, high above the snow-capped mountains and the misty plains, the green valleys, the tiny-seeming towns, the winding ribbons of rivers, the straight roads. But Jacquie didn't see much after the tray of drinks came round, for she kept re-ordering, of course.

Once back they resumed their previous pattern of life, and amazingly Jacquie managed to keep her alcoholism secret from all but her very closest friends, whose loyalty was unimpeachable. Certainly she was seen to indulge herself with a glass or two during games of bridge, or at other social gatherings, but she was never caught with her guard down. Only when people 'phoned her at odd hours, and Gerald was not there to answer the call, would the caller hear a strange tone in Jacquie's voice, and some strange thoughts from her lips; but she had always been a slightly unusual person, so the caller would let it slide. Now and again Jacquie would tell a caller that she had taken a sleeping tablet, which might account for her slurred speech, for it was known that, like her mother before her, she suffered with her "nerves".

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But things went from bad to worse. Once, she set the bedclothes alight, falling asleep with a cigarette between her fingers. Gerald didn't sleep with her any more. The result was a visit to the hospital out-patients department, where she was treated for burns. It didn't take the duty doctor very long to decide that she had been under the influence of alcohol, but Gerald maintained that it had been her birthday and that they had both had a drop too much. The doctor said nothing.

And now Gerald himself began to get ill. He had never been a robust man, and what with the worry about Jacquie and her neglecting him, which is what she virtually did, and the seeming impossibility of getting her to seek professional help, well, he began to weaken, his system began to give way. He suffered from stomach pains; he had headaches; he began to grow breathless after very little physical activity.

This manifest deterioration in the physical condition of the man she had married, the man she had once cared for and loved, at last began to make an impression on the poor woman. She didn't after all want to lose him; and she could no longer claim that her condition was necessarily worse than his. Pity for him began to grow in her hardened heart. But it was too late. One day a policeman arrived to tell her that Gerald had had an accident in his car. It seemed that he had had a heart attack and lost control. He was dead before the car collided with a bus.

With the house empty day and night, Jacquie began to lose track of time. There was no pattern to her life. Only the daylight and darkness divided Time, and, when she could close curtains and switch on the light, she could ignore those indications too. The clocks might read a.m. or p.m., it made no difference to her.

Of course her few friends tried to help, but she made things difficult for them. She became aggressive, like her father had been; and arrogant, like her mother. She assumed a silly supercilious voice more and more often; and she went on drinking. She did not play cards any more; she barely left the house—which was no longer tidy but neglected. She ate what she could lay her hands on. Occasionally she would go out and visit a supermarket where she would stock up for a month, filling her trolley with bottles of whisky as well as with tins of food. But she could not pay her bills. The cheques bounced; the cash-card was withdrawn.

But Jacquie was not without relatives, and they tried to rally round her. They managed to pay off her debts; and even found a fairly substantial investment which, in her irresponsible state, Jacquie, despite her erstwhile cleverness, had forgotten about. At least financially the household could be kept going. But where was the final answer to be found? She would not hear of consulting Alcoholics Anonymous. She didn't even recognise her condition. She thought she could "reform" whenever she wanted to, but she never wanted. After all, life was so good under the influence of alcohol that the poor compensations of sobriety, in the form of neat shelves, clean clothing, banal talk, regular hours, meant nothing to

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her. She didn't care for society, she didn't care for a new relationship with a man—or a woman.

Only one person in the world she cared for, and that was her cousin Sheila. She had always been close to Sheila and now Sheila was the only person in the world she cared for.

They would sit for long hours together, reminiscing, discussing where Jacquie had “gone wrong”, for she, as it were, played with the idea of having gone wrong, in the confidential intimacy of Sheila's company; but Sheila had a husband and children. Even Sheila found Jacquie impossible. Nevertheless, she had patience with her, and she in fact still loved her. And Sheila was the one reality which gave Jacquie pause, gave her some reason to go on living—well, Sheila and whisky itself. For Sheila somehow was inside her, inside Jacquie: she was in a way a part of herself, the part that didn't want to give up, the part that clung to the everyday banality of things. So, living with herself, for Jacquie, was a bit like the experience of Jacob wrestling with the angel. She had an entity within her from which she could not get free, so as to fulfil her own destiny, which was self-destruction. She must struggle and struggle, and yet she would be thrown down and go on living. And this without any great effort on Sheila's part, only the resilience of her love.

Yet it wasn't enough. One day the neighbours noticed that her lights were still on during the daytime, and though she was known to keep strange hours, a particular busybody 'phoned the police. They broke in and found Jacquie unconscious. She had taken an overdose of sleeping tablets.

When she came to, in hospital, she maintained that it had been an accident. She told them that she had been drunk. After all, it was a free country. She could get drunk if she liked. Soon she was haranguing the staff embarrassingly, and they had to leave things be. Sheila almost gave up on her, but she was her cousin and only friend. And she loved her.

Then Sheila became ill. Several weeks after Jacquie had been discharged from hospital, Sheila was diagnosed as suffering from an incurable cancer. Jacquie watched her diminish and suffer and finally die, leaving a heart-broken husband and young family. Jacquie knew now that life was a vicious snare. She did not believe in a God, so she had nothing to rail at but life itself—the sheer manifestation of life: the air, the clouds, the grass, the buildings, the people, the creatures, the noise, the movement, her very self. She retired to bed with her “comfort”—two bottles of Scotch.

And she drank steadily. She put the television on. She dozed. She drank. She staggered downstairs and made herself a sandwich. Then she went to bed again and drank. Her light was on all through the night. She was ill. She swallowed tablets. She revived. She drank. She 'phoned another cousin, someone else who had been concerned about her but who had been rebuffed too often to feel free to intrude. Would Vron get her a bottle of whisky? She felt ill and she knew that only that would help. Veronica protested but gave way, Jacquie sounded so terribly and heart-brokenly persuasive. She promised to come round within the hour.

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Jacquie sank down into the bedclothes. She smiled because relief was at hand. But she laughed too, to think she could so beguile someone. Then she wept. Then she drifted off into an uneasy doze.

And she dreamed. She dreamed she was flying home from Nice, with Gerald at her side, only she wasn't drinking the time away, she was talking with him affably; she heard herself laugh—a gentle, friendly laugh; and he laughed too. She was gazing out of the window, marvelling at the beauty of the snow-capped mountains, the misty plains, the winding rivers, the straight roads. She was enjoying the flight as she had never, in life, enjoyed perhaps anything. “So,” she thought, “it did not pass me by. I knew. I knew how wonderful things were. I knew how lovely life was. Only I couldn't break through to it.”

The 'plane seemed to give a lurch. She knew it would crash. But she did not panic. Alone of all the passengers, who were screaming and clutching each other as the 'plane dived through the air, she sat there, with a little smile on her face. Only she was not, by this time, actually sitting. No, the 'plane twisted in the air and turned upside-down and people were screaming or had lost consciousness as their bodies were wrenched by the straps that held them to their seats. But Jacquie had not fastened her seat belt. She was somehow suspended in the air, not whirled off balance but stable there, like a bird.

She heard someone knocking at the door. It was Vron with the bottle. “Thank God!” she murmured. But she could not get down to open the door. So she tried to shout, but hardly a sound escaped her. Veronica panicked. She went next door and asked if anyone could help her get in the house. But they were an elderly couple, so, once again, the police were called. They knew where to come without difficulty this time.

Jacquie was in the hospital again, and stayed there for two weeks. Her relatives were told that she must not be left alone. They could not answer for the consequences. There was a family conference. Could Jacquie be forced to have treatment? Had they the authority to invoke such a drastic measure? She was due out of the hospital in a day or two. Something had to be done. But it wasn't as though anyone could prove she had tried to commit suicide. In fact, that possibility had been ruled out. No, she was simply a woman who could not be trusted to go on living like other people did, and who, as a consequence, might end up doing away with herself either accidentally or on purpose. But it was her life.

What would her aggressive little father have said, and her arrogant mother? They would have cursed her and cajoled her, and dominated her, as they always had done; but there was no one left to guide her now, even by as rough means as these. Poor Gerald would have been able to do nothing but look on helplessly, as he always had.

She was a fierce bird was Jacquie, and no one could get the better of her. But neither could she get the better of herself. Her nature was to swoop on carrion and be sick on it. Once she had been young, with dark eyes and dark hair, a slender nose and narrow face,

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a trim figure, a knowing sideways look. She had cast a spell upon Gerald. Hopelessly he had fallen in love with her, and for a time their marriage was a good one; but then the dissatisfaction set in, the obsession with death and decay. Where had it come from? Out of the heart of life itself, surely. Only a fool failed to see that even the sun must die.

She could not live in a world of illusion. She had wanted to shout at her fellow men and women, to remind them that death was waiting for them, that they were all simply on holiday, a short holiday, the holiday from death that life is. They were all at the casino in Nice waiting for the roulette-wheel to spell out their fate. It was funny really, that people should be such babies, not to recognise what a world they were living in. Only those who could cast their thoughts outside themselves, to their children perhaps, could survive without being disgraced by their ignorance.

She returned home. Nothing had been done. She succeeded in repelling all would-be help. She went back to the bottle. The same disastrous routine was re-established, even to the sudden emergency calls for help and the occasional hospital detentions. Time slipped on as it will. Nothing was changed. People don't change. Only Time itself seems to change, and the change in the body from childhood to maturity, with its small change of personality perhaps.

Dementia began to set in. She imagined herself a bird, a jackdaw. Sometimes she was suspended near the roof of the body of that 'plane, watching the passengers plunge to their deaths screaming, clutching each other, but helpless; sometimes she was free in the outside air, floating over the snow-capped mountains where no bird could ever fly; sometimes she sat on the fence in her own back garden, watching Mrs Gregory hang out the washing, or children play in the garden of the house beyond; sometimes she grabbed bits of bacon-rind that someone had thrown for her. Once she sat on a man's outstretched arm, just to observe his incredulity at being visited so unexpectedly from Wild Nature, as it were. She laughed inside herself.

Now indeed she had entered the world of illusion, in a way she had not bargained for. And now there was reason to force her to have treatment. She was detained in a hospital where such cases as hers are treated, if not cured. But it didn't matter to her. She was a jackdaw now, free to roam the skies. Nothing could upset her any more. Everything was simply part of the free life she had attained at last. She needed no stimulant. She needed no human "relationship". And she died happy.

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