

BEYOND BLACK

HILARY MANTEL



Beyond **BLACK**

Hilary Mantel

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For Jane Haynes

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“There are powers at work in this country about which we have no knowledge.”

—H.M. the Queen
(attributed)

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one

Travelling: the dank oily days after Christmas. The motorway, its wastes looping London: the margin's scrub grass flaring orange in the lights, and the leaves of the poisoned shrubs striped yellow-green like a cantaloupe melon. Four o'clock: light sinking over the orbital road. Teatime in Enfield, night falling on Potter's Bar. There are nights when you don't want to do it, but you have to do it anyway. Nights when you look down from the stage and see closed stupid faces. Messages from the dead arrive at random. You don't want them and you can't send them back. The dead won't be coaxed and they won't be coerced. But the public has paid its money and it wants results.

A sea-green sky: lamps blossoming white. This is marginal land: fields of strung wire, of treadless tyres in ditches, fridges dead on their backs, and starving ponies cropping the mud. It is a landscape running with outcasts and escapees, with Afghans, Turks and Kurds: with scapegoats, scarred with bottle and burn marks, limping from the cities with broken ribs. The life forms here are rejects, or anomalies: the cats tipped from speeding cars, and the Heathrow sheep, their fleece clotted with the stench of aviation fuel.

Beside her, in profile against the fogged window, the driver's face is set. In the back seat, something dead stirs, and begins to grunt and breathe. The car flees across the junctions, and the space the road encloses is the space inside her: the arena of combat, the wasteland, the place of civil strife behind her ribs. A heart beats, taillights wink. Dim lights shine from tower blocks, from passing helicopters, from fixed stars. Night closes in on the perjured ministers and burnt-out pedophiles, on the unloved viaducts and graffitied bridges, on ditches beneath mouldering hedgerows and railings never warmed by human touch.

Night and winter: but in the rotten nests and empty setts, she can feel the signs of growth, intimations of spring. This is the time of Le Pendu, the Hanged Man, swinging by his foot from the living tree. It is a time of suspension, of hesitation, of the indrawn breath. It is a time to let go of

expectation, yet not abandon hope; to anticipate the turn of the Wheel of Fortune. This is our life and we have to lead it. Think of the alternative.

A static cloud bank, like an ink smudge. Darkening air.

It's no good asking me whether I'd choose to be like this, because I've never had a choice. I don't know about anything else. I've never been any other way.

And darker still. Colour has run out from the land. Only form is left: the clumped treetops like a dragon's back. The sky deepens to midnight blue. The orange of the streetlights is blotted to a fondant cerise; in pastureland, the pylons lift their skirts in a ferrous gavotte.

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two

Colette put her head around the dressing room door. “All right?” she said. “It’s a full house.”

Alison was leaning into the mirror, about to paint her mouth on. “Could you find me a coffee?”

“Or a gin and tonic?”

“Yes, go on then.”

She was in her psychic kit now; she had flung her day clothes over the back of a chair. Colette swooped on them; lady’s maid was part of her job. She slid her forearm inside Al’s black crepe skirt. It was as large as a funerary banner, a pall. As she turned it the right way out, she felt a tiny stir of disgust, as if flesh might be clinging to the seams.

Alison was a woman who seemed to fill a room, even when she wasn’t in it. She was of an unfeasible size, with plump creamy shoulders, rounded calves, thighs and hips that overflowed her chair; she was soft as an Edwardian, opulent as a showgirl, and when she moved you could hear (though she did not wear them) the rustle of plumes and silks. In a small space, she seemed to use up more than her share of the oxygen; in return her skin breathed out moist perfumes, like a giant tropical flower. When you came into a room she’d left—her bedroom, her hotel room, her dressing room backstage—you felt her as a presence, a trail. Alison had gone, but you would see a chemical mist of hair spray falling through the bright air. On the floor would be a line of talcum powder, and her scent—*Je Reviens*—would linger in curtain fabric, in cushions, and in the weave of towels. When she headed for a spirit encounter, her path was charged, electric; when her body was out on stage, her face—cheeks glowing, eyes alight—seemed to float still in the dressing room mirror.

In the centre of the room Colette stooped, picked up Al’s shoes. For a moment she disappeared from her own view. When her face bobbed back into sight in the mirror, she was almost relieved. What’s wrong with me? she thought. When I’m gone I leave no trace. Perfume doesn’t last on my skin. I barely sweat. My feet don’t indent the carpet.

“It’s true,” Alison said. “It’s as if you wipe out the signs of yourself as you go. Like a robot housekeeper. You polish your own fingerprints away.”

“Don’t be silly.” Colette said. “And don’t read my private thoughts.” She shook the black skirt, as if shaking Alison.

“I often ask myself, let’s see now, is Colette in the room or not? When you’ve been gone for an hour or two, I wonder if I’ve imagined you.”

Colette looped the black skirt onto a hanger, and hung it on the back of the long mirror. Soon Al’s big black overshirt joined it. It was Colette who had persuaded her into black. Black, she had said, black *and perfectly plain*. But Alison abhorred plainness. There must be something to capture the gaze, something to shiver, something to shine. At first glance the shirt seemed devoid of ornament, but a thin line of sequins ran down the sleeve, like the eyes of sly aliens, reflecting black within black. For her work onstage, she insisted on colour: emerald, burnt orange, scarlet. “The last thing you want, when you go out there,” she explained, “is to make them think of funerals.”

Now she pouted at herself in the glass. “I think that’s quite nice, don’t you?”

Colette glanced at her. “Yes, it suits you.”

Alison was a genius with makeup. She had boxes full and she used it all, carrying it in colour-coded wash bags and cases fitted with loops for brushes and small-size bottles. If the spirit moved her to want some apricot eye shadow, she knew just which bag to dip into. To Colette, it was a mystery. When she went out to get herself a new lipstick, she came back with one that, when applied, turned out to be the same colour as all the others she had, which was always, give or take, the colour of her lips.

“So what’s that shade called?” she asked.

Alison observed herself, a cotton bud poised, and effected an invisible improvement to her underlip. “Dunno. Why don’t you try it? But get me that drink first.” Her hand moved for her lipstick sealant. She almost said, look out, Colette, don’t tread on Morris.

He was on the floor, half sitting and half lying, slumped against the wall; his stumpy legs were spread out, and his fingers played with his fly buttons. When Colette stepped back she trampled straight over him.

As usual she didn't notice. But Morris did. "Fucking stuck-up cow," he said, as Colette went out. "White-faced fucking freak. She's like a bloody ghoul. Where did you get her, gel, a churchyard?"

Under her breath Alison swore back at him. In Colette's five years as her partner, he'd never accepted her; time meant little to Morris. "What would you know about churchyards?" she asked him. "I bet you never had a Christian burial. Concrete boots and a dip in the river, considering the people you mixed with. Or maybe you were sawed up with your own saw?"

Alison leaned forward again into the mirror, and slicked her mouth with the tiny brush from the glass tube. It tickled and stung. Her lips flinched from it. She made a face at herself. Morris chuckled.

It was almost the worst thing, having him around at times like these, in your dressing room, before the show, when you were trying to calm yourself down and have your intimate moments. He would follow you to the lavatory if he was in that sort of mood. A colleague had once said to her, "It seems to me that your guide is on a very low vibratory plane, very low indeed. Had you been drinking when he first made contact?"

"No," Al had told her. "I was only thirteen."

"Oh, that's a terrible age," the woman said. She looked Alison up and down. "Junk food, I expect. Empty calories. Stuffing yourself."

She'd denied it, of course. In point of fact she never had any money after school for burgers or chocolate, her mum keeping her short in case she used the money to get on a bus and run away. But she couldn't put any force into her denial. Her colleague was right, Morris was a low person. How did she get him? She probably deserved him, that was all there was to it. Sometimes she would say to him, Morris, what did I do to deserve you? He would rub his hands and chortle. When she had provoked him and he was in a temper with her, he would say, count your blessings, girl, you fink I'm bad but you could of had MacArthur. You could have had Bob Fox, or Aitkenside, or Pikey Pete. You could have had my mate Keef Capstick. You could of had Nick, and then where'd you be?

Mrs. Etchells (who taught her the psychic trade) had always told her, there are some spirits, Alison, who you already know from way back, and you just have to put names to the faces. There are some spirits that are spiteful and will do you a bad turn. There are others that are bloody bugging bastards, excuse my French, who will suck the marrow out your bones. Yes, Mrs. E, she'd said, but how will I know which are which? And