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# Introduction

Strictly speaking, when I was asked to write the introduction for this collection of Ruth Rendell short stories, I should have said no. As a devoted Rendell fan, I was hugely tempted, but busy with other projects and stressed about deadlines. I nearly did say no – until I remembered that reading Ruth Rendell was what I did for many years while I was supposed to be doing other more soul-destroying and oppressive things. Reading Ruth Rendell was what saved me from alienation and disillusion during my student days. Besides, if I said no, I would have to wait until the publication date to read these exciting stories that I hadn't known existed, whereas if I said yes, I would get to read them immediately. To cut a long story short ... it turned out that I couldn't resist.

I first discovered Rendell when I was supposed to be doing no such thing – I was supposed to be working. During my gap year I worked for Manchester Theatres Limited, where my job was to distribute leaflets around the city centre, advertising our shows.

Illicit shopping was far more fun, however, so one day, instead of leafletting, I ventured into Hatchards bookshop. There I found two whole rows of Ruth Rendell novels. I knew from my first glance at the blurbs that this was a writer I would be spending a lot of time with. I bought *From Doon with Death*, the first Inspector Wexford novel, and loved it. But then I must have been distracted by other things, because I didn't immediately read any more. Silly me.

A year later, I went to university, and very much didn't want to be there – I was on the wrong course, one I had chosen based on what I'd been told I was good at, not what I wanted to do, and I felt thoroughly miserable. I'm not exaggerating when I say that buying the set texts for that course made me feel physically sick. Good old Ruth Rendell came to my rescue. The set texts bookshop had a fiction section, containing a row of Rendells. In that moment, I knew that these books, and not *Don Quixote*, were what I would be immersing myself in for the next few years.

The hookiness of Rendell's writing was something I hadn't experienced since discovering Agatha Christie at the age of twelve. I started to collect the books, including those written as Barbara Vine, and bought a new bookcase specially for that purpose. Very soon, Rendell was up there with Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie on my official Favourite Authors Of All Time list. I watched *Inspector Wexford* on television, bought a cassette tape of the soundtrack and listened to it non-stop in the car. It drove my boyfriend mad. I went to see Rendell speaking at Waterstones in Manchester, and she said something I've never forgotten: that it's vital to hook the reader from the very first line. If the first line is not gripping, the reader won't persevere.

And boy, was Rendell gripping. The first line of *A Judgement in Stone*, the first paragraph of *A Dark-Adapted Eye* (a Barbara Vine book), the amazing twist in *The Secret House of Death*, the atmospheric blending of past and present in *Asta's Book* ... the list could go on and on. In Rendell's universe, oddness is absolutely commonplace. It's everywhere, and fascinating; it's in all of us, however hard we try to hide it. There is no (good) Us and (evil) Them – we're all desperately trying to seem normal and functional while wrestling with twisted obsessions and weird preoccupations. For this reason, many readers don't find Rendell's fiction reassuring enough, but I've always felt the opposite. Rendell gets it. She doesn't tidy people up in fiction. She understands that most real people are far weirder than most novels allow their protagonists to be. As a reader, I can only feel reassured around those writers who truly understand how dysfunctional humans are.

Rendell mastered the short story form as well as the novel, publishing seven original short story collections in her lifetime. The stories in this collection are previously uncollected, and each one is a miracle of narrative construction – shapely, taut, suspenseful. She offers the same narrative satisfaction in her stories as she does in her novels, which is not true of all writers. Many short stories give us simply a slice of life, a snapshot of a moment. Rendell's, in contrast, have beginnings, middles and ends and they keep you on the edge of your seat throughout.

The stories in this book are amazingly gripping. Many protagonists, despite being devious themselves, are oddly naive. They run into trouble because they imagine everyone around them is more virtuous and less calculating than they themselves are. They

fail, in one story after another, to make the imaginative leap from knowing what they're capable of to working out that others might be capable of similar immorality.

A recurring theme is the human ego and the harm it can do. In the title story, 'A Spot of Folly', the protagonist cheats on his wife and has dalliances with other women mainly so that he can boast to his male colleagues – if he doesn't get to boast, he seems to feel that his sexual prowess almost doesn't count. Most of the stories feature people who imagine they're more in control of their lives than they in fact are. They break interpersonal and social contracts thinking that they're unique, that everyone else will play along – but time and time again, Rendell's protagonists discover that promise-breakers attract other promise-breakers. The law of karma is strong in these stories – nobody gets away with anything. The protagonist in 'The Price of Joy' undervalues what he has simply because he has it; he values what he's discarded and can't get back. This book is full of unrestrained ego and all its satisfying narrative possibilities.

Traditional crime fiction, say some, offers the satisfaction of good triumphing over evil, while a lot of contemporary crime invites readers to sympathise equally with the victim and the perpetrator. Rendell chooses a third option in these stories, and shows that often killer and victim are equally dreadful and that it's foolish to care about either. It's easy to say that Rendell is a misanthrope, but that's a simplistic reading of her work. Rather, she appears to be saying that there is a self-seeking and remorseless streak in human nature of which we must all beware. She brings to life the worst that could happen, always springing from dangerous delusions and disastrous decisions. To claim that she painted all

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people as awful is as daft as suggesting that Edgar Degas believed all women should be ballet dancers.

There are three ghost stories in this collection. ‘Never Sleep in a Bed Facing a Mirror’ is three lines long and is superb. Utterly chilling, it shows us how much can be communicated in very few words. It’s the best tiny story I’ve ever read, even better than Ernest Hemingway’s famous six-worder about baby shoes. The other two ghost stories here are longer: one is conventional, one isn’t. In both, ghosts take on the role played by the human ego in the non-supernatural stories, and cause people to commit dreadful crimes.

The last story here – about a family in denial of what they know to be true: that the world is about to end after some kind of nuclear disaster – is the perfect chilling note to end on. The protagonists don’t mention their impending doom, and pretend they don’t know what’s happened. In this final story, we start to feel that any delusions we harbour, whether ghostly or egotistical, might be entirely understandable in the face of the horror all around us – which might be nuclear destruction, as in this story, or it might be what we know of the world, life, death and other people.

It’s rare, from my perhaps-not-sufficiently-highbrow perspective, to find a collection of short stories that’s as satisfying as a novel, but this one passes the test with flying colours. It’s the perfect addition to all Rendell fans’ collections and the perfect starting point for those who are new to her work.

Sophie Hannah

## Never Sleep in a Bed Facing a Mirror

**A** lone in the four-poster, she glanced up from her book and saw in the mirror a little old woman sitting beside her. She shut her eyes, looked again, saw an empty bed, neatly made with fresh linen. The hotel staff, summoned by her screams, found no one, not even herself.

## A Spot of Folly

The other delegates to the sales conference were spending the evening at the Folies Bergère and going on afterward to some night club. Unless he could scrape up an acquaintance in the bar, which the language barrier made unlikely, there would be no one to whom he could relate his experience of the past few hours. As he drove the Renault into the underground car park, Sandy Vaughan considered this with a shade of bitterness that threatened to eclipse his triumphant mood. To tell his sort of story when it is fresh in the mind – and the body – is everything. Much is lost by waiting till next day. A gloom descends on it in inverse ratio to the brightness of the morning light, and that which has evinced one's worldly wisdom and conquering charm at midnight becomes stale, flat and unprofitable at 7:30 in the morning.

The foyer of the Hotel Toronto, to which Sandy ascended by elevator, was dimly lit. The night porter sat behind the reception desk reading *France Soir* and smoking a small black cigar. Sandy



asked for his room key and was going back to the elevator when he noticed there was still a light on in the bar. A little nightcap – a double whiskey, say – would send him to sleep and console him for the lack of companionship. The bar seemed to be empty except for the barman, a sullen-looking youth, occupied precisely as was the night porter.

Sandy pushed open the double glass doors. He got halfway to the bar and then saw that the place wasn't, as he'd first believed, deserted. At a table in a far corner, an empty glass and a full ashtray in front of him, sat Denis Crawford looking, Sandy thought, as if he'd lost a thousand francs on a dud lottery ticket. But this did nothing to deter Sandy. He was delighted to find so unexpectedly a friend and a listener. He charged across the room, waving jovially as if he hadn't seen Denis for a year.

'Well, well, well,' he chuckled, slapping Denis on the back. 'Fancy finding you here!'

'I'm staying here,' said Denis.

'I know you are, old man, but I thought you'd gone off with the boys to the Folies.'

'I don't much care for that sort of thing.' Shoved, dug in the ribs, Denis edged away along the upholstered seat.

'Didn't you go?'

Sandy had been hoping for just such an opening. Slightly lowering his voice, leaning closer, he said, 'I've been having a little spot of follies on my own account.'

Denis said nothing. His look indicated that he thought Sandy had been to a strip show, a misapprehension Sandy intended to dispel. 'Wait till you hear, old man,' he said. 'But a drink first, eh?'

‘I don’t want another, thanks, Sandy.’

‘Nonsense, of course you do.’ He shouted, ‘*Garçon!*’ to the barman whose face became even more sullen at this term of address. ‘*Deux* whiskey sours,’ and he held up two fingers in case there should be any doubt.

Denis said, ‘I don’t think he much cares for being called that.’

‘Then he must lump it, old man. My French may not be up to your standards – I didn’t have the advantage of going to school in France – but I flatter myself it’s adequate, perfectly adequate.’

‘I’m sure you manage, Sandy.’

Here was another excellent cue. ‘I do that all right, Den, old boy. My not *parlez*-ing like a bloody French dictionary didn’t stand in my way tonight, I can tell you. There is one activity you can get by in with a universal language, and you won’t need three guesses to tell me what that is.’

The barman slapped down the whiskey sours and while Sandy muttered a curt ‘*Merçi*,’ Denis let forth a flood of which Sandy caught the gist, that he was apologizing for keeping that sulky boy up so late. The barman’s face registered a slightly warmer expression. Sandy shrugged impatiently at the diversion. He took a swig at his drink and tried again.

‘By God, I need that after what I’ve been up to.’

‘Well, what have you been up to?’

Sandy didn’t much care for the way Denis had said that, with a half sigh as if he were bored. Denis Crawford had better remember he was a junior executive of the firm, that he’d been with them only nine months, and that it was only because of his French and Sandy’s kind string-pulling that he was here in Paris at all. ‘I’ll tell you, my lad. I’ve been up to what I get up to whenever I find

myself at a loose end in a big city – to wit, passing a highly enjoyable evening in the arms of a very sweet chick.’

‘You what?’ said Denis.

‘Come on now, laddie, you heard. I was all set to go along to the Folies with the boys, but I had ten minutes to kill so I popped into this bar in Montmartre for a quick one. The next thing I knew there was this chick giving me the eye. And was she an eyeful herself!’ Sandy chuckled reminiscently.

‘We went back to her place, a lovely little flat right up at the top of Montmartre, and then – well, you can imagine. I don’t need to go into details.’

But he went into a few just the same. ‘I’d have stayed all night, as a matter of fact, but she was expecting her boyfriend home at half-past eleven. I didn’t fancy any rough stuff, and he’s of a jealousy *formidable*, she said. But it was a real wrench tearing myself away from a chick like that.’

To Sandy’s amusement Denis had flushed darkly. He seemed quite upset, almost as if he’d had a shock, and when he reached for a cigarette his hand was unsteady. At last he said in a very low voice, ‘Do you make a habit of this sort of thing?’

‘When I’m out of England, I told you. What’s so terrible about that? A man needs a bit of comfort after a hard day’s work.’

‘I never knew. I hadn’t the faintest idea.’ Really, you’d have thought Sandy had confessed to some crime, some nasty perversion. Sandy started to laugh at the man’s naivety, but Denis’ next question made him almost cross. ‘What does Diana say about these – these goings-on?’

‘You don’t suppose I let my wife into secrets of that sort?’

‘But she loves you, she’s devoted to you.’

‘So she should be,’ said Sandy, peeved by this censorious inquisition. ‘I’ve given her two smashing little kids, haven’t I? And a damn sight better house than her father ever had, and a car of her own and whatever she likes to spend on clothes. What more does she expect?’

Denis Crawford hadn’t yet touched his drink. He raised his right arm now in a funny gesture as if to ward off a blow and in letting it fall across the table as he uttered the single word, ‘Fidelity,’ he swept his glass and its contents to the floor. There was a tinkling crash and a little pool of liquid on the carpet. It was, of course, pure accident, as Sandy, not sorry for this interruption, hastened to say.

The barman put down his paper, got off his stool, and came over to pick up the broken glass. He regarded the carpet in gloomy doubt, thought better of any notion of swabbing up the liquid, and instead smudged it further in with his toe.

‘*Encore, un whiskey sour,*’ said Sandy.

‘Not for me. I’m going to bed.’

Sandy watched him go. He didn’t cancel the order but drank it himself. Well, he’d know better than to confide in Denis Crawford again, the miserable milksop. Sandy liked this alliterative combination so much that he repeated it several times under his breath – miserable milksop, miserable mealy-mouthed milksop.

Of course all that sort of moralistic disapproval could be put down to envy. Denis might be tall and dark and good-looking and only twenty-eight, but he hadn’t the faintest idea how to go about life. And Sandy remembered how dim he’d been when he’d first come to London and had stayed with him and Diana before he’d found a place of his own. Even then he’d refused all Sandy’s

friendly overtures and offers to show him the town, preferring to go to those way-out cinemas or stay in with Diana and the kids. Poor old Diana, she must have got pretty fed up with him following her about like a little dog.

Yes, Denis Crawford was a poor thing. Couldn't drink, never had a woman, didn't know he was born. Might even be queer. This thought cheered Sandy so much that he condescended to say a jolly '*Bon soir*' to the barman before going upstairs and falling into a heavy sleep.

On the following day they got up from the conference table at lunchtime, and Sandy, not at all anxious to join the others in an organized trip up the Eiffel Tower, made for the telephone. First he called his wife. He knew his duty. It was one thing to have a bit of fun when one was off the leash, quite another to neglect one's wife. Sandy had nothing but contempt for men who neglected their wives. Poor old Diana worried herself sick about him if he didn't call regularly.

'Hello, darling,' he said in hearty cheerful tones when she answered. 'How's tricks?'

Funny creatures, women, you never quite knew how they'd react. She'd moaned like hell when he'd told her the conference was going to last a whole week this year, yet now her 'Oh, it's you' sounded disappointed. For some reason. But it was no good letting them rile you and useless to probe into the causes of their funny little moods.

Instead he chatted breezily about Paris, giving her the impression he'd been out to Versailles and into some of those art galleries. When she'd told him the kids were all right and she was all right and he'd promised to bring her back some Rochas perfume, he hung up, his duty done. Now for pleasure.