

In
Madeline Ginzburg
The Little Victims
(trans. Dick Davis)
London: Dunt Books, 2018

Human Relationships

The problem of our relationships with other human beings lies at the centre of our life: as soon as we become aware of this – that is, as soon as we clearly see it as a problem and no longer as the muddle of unhappiness, we start to look for its origins, and to reconstruct its course throughout our whole life.

When we are little children we have our eyes fixed above all on the world of adults, which is dark and mysterious to us. It seems absurd to us because we don't understand any of the words which adults say to one another, or the sense of their decisions and actions, or the reasons for their changes of mood and sudden outbursts of anger.

We don't understand the words which adults say to each other and we are not interested in them; on the contrary they are infinitely boring to us. What interests us are the decisions of theirs that can alter our daily routine, the black moods that spoil lunches and suppers, the sudden slamming of doors, and voices raised in the night. We realise that at any moment an unexpected storm – complete with the sound of doors being slammed and objects being hurled about – can erupt from a few quiet words. We nervously listen for the slightest indication of violence in the voices that are talking. We can be alone and absorbed in play when, suddenly, angry voices are raised in the house: we go on playing mechanically, pushing pebbles and grass into a little heap of earth to make a hill: but we are no longer interested in the little hill because we know that we cannot be happy until the house is at peace again; doors slam and we jump; angry words fly from one room to another – words that are incomprehensible to us and we do not try to understand them or discover the murky reasons for their existence, we vaguely think that whatever reasons there may be must be horrible; we are so weighed down by all the absurd mystery of adult life. And sometimes this complicates our relationships with other children, with the world of our equals: sometimes

we have a friend with us who has come to play; we are making a little hill with him when a slammed door tells us that peace is at an end; burning with shame we pretend to be extremely interested in the little hill, we do our utmost to distract our friend's attention from the brutal voices that are re-echoing through the house; with hands that are suddenly sweaty and tired we precisely push our little bits of wood into the heap of earth. We are absolutely certain that no one ever argues or screams brutally words at one another in our friend's house; in our friend's house everyone is calm and cultured, and arguing is a shame peculiar to our house; then one day we discover with immense relief that they argue in our friend's house just as they do in our house, as they do perhaps in every house on earth.

We become adolescents when the words that adults exchange with one another become intelligible to us; intelligible, but of no interest because we no longer care whether peace reigns in the house or not. Now we are able to follow the ins and outs of family rows and to foresee their course and how long they will last; and we are not afraid of them any more, doors slam and we do not jump. The house is no longer what it was for us before, it is no longer the point from which we look out on the rest

of the universe, it is a place where – by chance – we eat and live: we eat quickly, lending one inattentive ear to the adults' conversation – a conversation which is intelligible to us but which strikes us as useless; we eat and quickly escape to our rooms so that we don't have to listen to their useless conversation; and we are able to be perfectly happy even if the adults around us are arguing and sulking day in day out. The things that matter to us no longer happen within the walls of our house but outside, in the street and at school; we feel that we cannot be happy if the other children at school look down on us in any way. We would do anything to escape their contempt; and we do anything. We write comic verses to amuse our friends, which we recite to them with ridiculous grimaces that we are ashamed of afterwards; we collect obscene words so that they will think well of us, we go looking all day long for obscene words in the books and dictionaries that we have in the house; and because it seems to us that a showy, gaudy way of dressing is popular with our friends we (against our mother's wishes) try to add something that is a bit showy and vulgar to our quiet clothes. We vaguely feel that if we are looked down on it is above all because we are shy: who knows, perhaps that moment long ago when we were making a little heap of earth with our

friend and the doors slammed and brutal voices re-echoed and shame burnt our cheeks, perhaps it was that moment which planted the roots of shyness in us: and we think that our whole life will have to be spent in freeing ourselves from this shyness, in learning to move under the gaze of others with the same self-confidence and carelessness as when we are alone. We think of our shyness as the most important obstacle to winning sympathy and universal approbation: and we are hungry and thirsty for this approbation: in our lonely daydreams we see ourselves riding triumphantly on horseback through a city, in the midst of an applauding, adoring crowd.

At home we punish the adults – whose absurdly mysterious ways weighed us down for so many years – with our profound contempt, with our taciturn, impenetrable faces; their mystery has obsessed us for so many years, and now we take our revenge by confronting them with our mystery, a silent impenetrable face and eyes of stone. And we also take revenge on the adults at home for the contempt shown us by other schoolchildren. It seems to us that this contempt includes not only us but our whole family, our social position, the furnishings in our home, our parents' habits and behaviour. Every now and then anger erupts in the house as of old, but now it is directed

at us, at our stony faces: a whirlwind of violent language breaks over us; doors slam but we do not jump; now the doors slam because of us as we sit unmoving at the table, with a disdainful smile: later on, alone in our room, our disdainful smile suddenly melts away and we burst into tears and daydream about our loneliness and how the others do not understand us; and we feel strangely happy to be pouring out these scalding tears and stifling our sobs in a cushion. Then mother arrives and is touched at the sight of our tears and offers to take us out for an ice-cream or to the cinema; with our red, swollen eyes, but stony-faced and impenetrable again, we sit next to mother at a little table in a cafe, eating ice-cream with a tiny spoon; all around us moves a crowd of people who are apparently calm and light-hearted while we, oh we are the gloomiest, most gauche and detestable thing on earth.

'Who are the others and who are we?' we wonder. Sometimes we stay alone in our room for a whole afternoon, thinking; with a vague feeling of dizziness we wonder whether the others really exist at all, or if it is we who have invented them. We say that perhaps when we are not there all the others cease to exist and disappear in an instant; and miraculously reassemble, suddenly appearing from the earth, as soon as we look at them.

Isn't it possible that one day when we turn round unexpectedly we shall find nothing, no one, and be left staring into emptiness? And so there's no reason, we say, to get so upset about the others' contempt, because perhaps the others don't exist and therefore think neither about us nor about themselves. While we are absorbed in these dizzying thoughts mother comes and suggests we go out for an ice-cream; and we feel inexplicably happy, excessively happy, thinking about the ice-cream that we are going to eat in a little while; and however has the prospect of an ice-cream made us so happy we wonder, we who are so adult, with our dizzying thoughts, who are so strangely lost in a world of shadows? We agree to mother's suggestion, but we are careful not to show her how happy we are about it; our lips are sealed as we walk to the cafe with her.

Though we constantly tell ourselves that perhaps the others do not exist, that it is we who have invented them, we inexplicably continue to suffer from the contempt shown to us by our schoolfellows, and from our heaviness and clumsiness which we ourselves find shamefully contemptible; when others talk to us our face feels so ugly and shapeless that we want to cover it with our hands; and yet we are always daydreaming that someone

will fall in love with us, that he sees us in the cafe while we are having an ice-cream with mother, that he secretly follows us home and writes us a love-letter; we wait for this letter and every day we are extremely surprised that we haven't received it yet; we have murmured its phrases so often that we know them by heart, and when this letter does arrive we really shall have a marvellous mystery that is nothing to do with home, a secret intrigue whose ramifications are entirely outside the house; because we have to confess that at the moment our mystery is a poor thing and that behind the stony mask which we offer to our parents for their goodnight kiss we are hiding very little; after that kiss we hurry to our room while our parents whisper suspicious questions about us.

In the morning we go to school after having stared concentratedly at our face in the mirror: our face has lost the soft delicacy of childhood; now we think regretfully about childhood and when we made little heaps of earth and our only unhappiness was when there was quarrelling in the house: now they do not quarrel so often in the house – our elder brothers have gone off to live their own lives, our parents have become older and quieter; but now we don't care about the house; we walk to school alone in the mist; when we were little mother came to

school with us and came to collect us; now we are alone in the mist and terribly responsible for everything we do.

God has said 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. This seems absurd to us; God has said something absurd, he has imposed on man something that is impossible to carry out. How can we love our neighbour when he despises us and won't let us love him? And how can we love ourselves – disgusting and heavy and gloomy as we are? How can we love our neighbour who perhaps doesn't exist and is only a crowd of shadows while God has created us, only us, and placed us on an earth that is a shadow where we live on our dizzying thoughts? We have believed in God since we were little, but now we think that perhaps he doesn't exist, or he exists and doesn't care about us because he has placed us in such cruel circumstances, and so for us it is as if he didn't exist. Then at table we refuse some dish we particularly like and we pass the night stretched out on the rug in our room in order to mortify ourselves and punish ourselves for our hateful thoughts, and be loved by God.

'But God does not exist' we think, after an entire night shivering on the floor with our limbs numbed by cold and sleep. God does not exist because he could not have invented this absurd, monstrous world; this complicated

contrivance in which a human being walks alone in the fog each morning; between high houses inhabited by his neighbour who does not love him and who is impossible to love. And that monstrous inexplicable race who are of a different sex from us and who possess a terrible ability to do everything good and everything evil to us, who have a terrible secret power over us, they are also our neighbour. Could we ever be attractive to that other race, we who are so despised by our companions of our own sex, who are considered to be so boring and empty, so useless and clumsy at everything?

Then one day it happens that the most admired, the most sought after of all our schoolfellows, the top of the class, suddenly becomes friends with us. How this has come about we do not know. She suddenly fixed her blue eyes on us, walked home with us and began to think well of us. In the afternoon she comes to our house to do her homework; in our hands we hold the precious exercise book belonging to the top of the class, with her beautiful angular handwriting in blue ink: we can copy her homework which has no mistakes in it. How has such happiness come to us? How have we acquired this friend, who is so proud with everyone and so unapproachable? Now she wanders within the walls of our room, shaking her mane

of red hair beside us, leaning her sharp profile – which is covered in pinkish freckles – over the familiar objects in our room: it seems to us that some rare tropical animal has miraculously been domesticated and appeared within the walls of our house. She wanders around our room, asks where things come from, asks if she can borrow some book or other; she has tea with us, and she spits plum stones off the terrace with us. We who were despised by everyone have been chosen by the most unapproachable, the most unexpected companion. We talk to her convulsively so that she will not be bored by our company, so that she will not leave us forever: in a rush we tell her all our obscene words and everything we know about films and sport. When we are alone we say the syllables of her beautiful sonorous name over and over again, and we prepare a thousand things to say to her the next day; we are wild with happiness and begin to imagine that she is like us in every way: the next day we try the speeches we have prepared on her, we tell her everything about our life, even our dizzying suspicion that neither people nor things exist: she looks at us uneasily, giggles, and makes fun of us a little. Then we realise that we have made a mistake and that it is not possible to talk to her about this subject; we fall back on obscene words and sport.

Meanwhile, our situation at school has changed overnight: everyone begins to respect us when they see that we are respected by the most respected person in the group; the comic verses we have written and which we now recite are received with shrieks of shrill applause: before, we could not make our voice heard above the general hubbub of voices, now everyone listens in silence when we speak; now they ask us questions and walk arm in arm with us, they help us with the things we are less good at, like sports or homework we don't know how to do. The world no longer appears to us as a monstrous contivance but like a simple, smiling little island populated with friends: we do not thank God for such a lucky change in our fortunes because we no longer think about God; it seems impossible to us to think about anything except the cheerful faces of our friends gathered around us, the way the mornings flow happily and easily past, the crazy things we have said that made everyone laugh; and our face in the mirror is no longer something gloomy and shapeless but the face which our friends greet happily every morning. Sustained in this way by the friendship of companions of our own sex, we look with less horror at that other race, the people of a different sex from ours; it almost seems to us that we could easily do without

this different race, that we could be happy without their approbation; we almost wish we could spend our whole life surrounded by school friends, saying crazy things and making them laugh.

Then little by little we discover one friend, in the midst of the crowd of friends, who is particularly happy to be with us and to whom, we realise, we have an infinite number of things to say. She is not the top of the class, she is not particularly well thought of by the others, she does not wear showy clothes: in fact her clothes are made of fine, warm cloth very like that which our mother chooses for us; and when we are walking home with her we realise that her shoes are identical to ours – strong and simple, not showy and flimsy like those of our other friends; we laughingly point this out to her. Little by little we find out that the same habits prevail in her house as in ours: and that she bathes often, and that her mother does not let her go to see romantic films just as our mother doesn't allow us to. She is a person like us; she is from the same social background. By this time we are very fed up with the company of the top of the class who still comes to see us every afternoon; by this time we are fed up with repeating the same old obscene words and now we proudly confront the top of the class with

remarks about the subject that interests us, our doubts about existence; we do this so disdainfully and carelessly, and with such pride, that the top of the class doesn't really understand us, but smiles shyly; we see that shy, cowardly smile on her lips; she is afraid of losing us. We are no longer bewitched by her blue eyes, and when we are with her we long for the round, hazel eyes of our other friend; and the top of the class realises this and is upset by it, and we are proud of making her upset; and so we too are capable of making someone suffer.

With our new friend who has round eyes, we despise the top of the class and our other friends who are so noisy and vulgar, with all their obscene words that they are always repeating: now we wish to be very refined, with our new friend we judge people and things according to criteria of refinement or vulgarity. We discover that it is refined to stay children as long as possible; to the great relief of our mothers we give up all the vulgar showy things we had added to our clothes; in our clothes as in our demeanour and habits we look for a childlike simplicity. We spend extraordinary afternoons with our new friend; we are never weary of talking and listening. We are astonished when we think of our friendship with the top of the class whom we have now stopped seeing; being with the

top of the class became so tiring that in the end we felt our eyelids smarting, our skin itching and the muscles of our face aching with the effort of keeping up our false smile; it was tiring to hide our dislike, to suppress confidences, to constantly choose those few words that could be said to the top of the class; being with our new friend is so pleasant, we have nothing to hide or suppress and we can let our words flow freely. We even confide our dizzying suspicions about existence to her: and then she tells us with astonishment that she has had the same suspicions: 'but do you exist?' we ask her, and she swears that she exists, and we are infinitely happy.

We and our new friend are sorry that we are of the same sex, because if we were of different sexes we could get married so that we would be together for ever and ever. We have no fear of each other, or shame, or horror: and so a shadow hangs over our life which could now have been so happy – the uncertainty as to whether one day someone of the opposite sex will be able to love us. People of the opposite sex walk next to us, brush against us in the street, perhaps think about us or have designs on us which we can never know; they have our fate – our happiness – in their hands. Perhaps the person who is suitable for us, who could love us and whom we could

love, is among them: the person who is right for us; but where? How can we recognise this person, how can we make him recognise us, in the crowded city? In which house in the city, at which point on the earth, does this person live who is right for us, who is like us in every way, who is ready to answer all our questions, ready to listen to us for ever without getting bored, to smile at our faults, to live with our face all his life? What words ought we to say so that he will recognise us among thousands? How should we dress, what places should we go in order to meet him?

We are tormented by these thoughts and when we are with people of the opposite sex we feel extremely shy because we are afraid that one of them could be the right person for us and we could lose him with a word. We think carefully about all our words before uttering them and then we say them hurriedly, in a strangled voice; because of our fear we glance about gloomily and have tiny, abrupt gestures; we are aware of all this but we tell ourselves that the person who has been made for us must recognise us even though we have these abrupt gestures and this strangled voice: if he doesn't give any sign of having noticed us it is because he is not the right person; the right person will recognise us and pick us out

among thousands. We wait for the right person; every morning when we get up we think that this could be the day when we meet him; we dress and comb our hair with infinite care, and overcome the desire to go out in an old raincoat and shapeless shoes; the right person might just happen to be on the corner of the street. Thousands and thousands of times we think that we are in the presence of the person made for us: our heart beats tumultuously at the sound of a particular name, at the curve of a nose or a smile, and only because we have suddenly decided that this is the nose and the name and the smile of the person made for us: a car with yellow wheels and an old lady make us blush uncontrollably because we think them the car and the mother of the right person for us – the car in which we will set off on our honeymoon, the mother who will have to place her hand on us in benediction. All at once we realise we have made a mistake – that wasn't the right person, he is of no interest to us whatsoever, and we don't suffer because we have no time to suffer; suddenly the car with yellow wheels, the name and the smile fade away and are absorbed into the thousand useless things that surround our life. But we don't have time to suffer; we are leaving for a holiday in the country and we are absolutely certain that during these

holidays we shall meet the right person; because we are convinced that the train will take us to the right person we are more or less unmoved by parting from our friend with the round eyes; and she for her part is convinced of the same thing: goodness knows why we are suddenly convinced that the right person will be met on a summer holiday in the country. The long, lonely, boring months pass by: we write interminable letters to our friend and to console ourselves for the meeting that never happens we carefully collect together all the favourable judgements passed on us by old acquaintances of the family or by aged relatives and write them out for our friend; she writes to us similar letters containing the favourable judgements on her intelligence and beauty passed by her aged relatives. When autumn comes we have to admit inwardly that nothing extraordinary has happened; but we are not disappointed, we eagerly rejoin our friend and our other companions and contentedly settle down to the autumn; the right person is waiting for us, perhaps, at the corner of the avenue.

Then little by little we withdraw from our friend. We find her a bit boring, 'bourgeois'; she is always obsessed with elegance and refinement. Now we want to be poor: we become involved with a group of poor friends and

every day we proudly go to their unheated house. We wear our old raincoat now, and with pride: we still count on meeting the right person, but he must love our old raincoat, he must love our shapeless shoes, our cheap cigarettes and our bare, red hands. Dressed in our old raincoat we walk alone at dusk past the houses on the edge of the city; we have discovered the edge of the city, the signboards of the little cafes beside the river, and we linger lost in thought in front of little shops where long pink bodices are hung up, and workmen's overalls, and coffee-coloured underpants; we stand gaping in front of a shop window of old postcards and old hairpins: we like everything that is old, dusty and poor: we go searching through the city for poor, dusty things. Meanwhile it pours with rain onto our old raincoat, which lets water through, and on to our uncovered head; we don't have an umbrella - we would rather commit suicide than go out with an umbrella; we don't have an umbrella or a hat or gloves or the tram fare: all we have is a dirty handkerchief in our pocket, and some crushed cigarettes and kitchen matches.

Suddenly it occurs to us that the poor are our neighbour, the poor are the neighbour whom we have to love; we watch the poor as they pass by us; we look out for a chance to take a blind beggar across the road, to offer

our arm to some old lady who has slipped in a puddle; we shyly caress – with the tips of our fingers – the filthy hair of children playing in the alleyways; we return home soaked to the skin, chilled to the marrow, and triumphant. We are not poor, we do not spend the night on a bench in a public park, we do not drink cloudy soup from a tin saucepan; we are not poor, but only by chance: we shall be extremely poor tomorrow.

Meanwhile the friend whom we have stopped seeing suffers on our account, just as the top of the class suffered when we stopped seeing her. We know this, but we don't feel sorry about it; it even gives us a kind of underhand pleasure, because if someone suffers on our account it means that we – who for so long thought of ourselves as weak and insignificant – have in our hands the power to make someone suffer. We don't suspect that we are perhaps cynical and wicked because we don't suspect that our friend is also our neighbour: neither do we think that our parents are our neighbour: our neighbour is the poor. We give our parents severe looks as they eat their good food at their well-lit table; we also eat this good food, but we think that this is by chance, and it will only be like this for a very short time: in a little while we will have nothing more than a bit of black bread and a tin saucepan.

One day we meet the right person. We are unmoved, because we haven't recognised him; we walk with the right person along the streets at the edge of the city, and little by little we fall into the habit of walking together every day. From time to time we wonder absent-mindedly whether we are not perhaps walking with the right person, but we think that probably we are not. We are too calm; the earth and the sky are unchanged, the minutes and hours flow quietly on without awakening any deep echo in our heart. We have been mistaken so often; we believed we were in the presence of the right person and we weren't. And in the presence of each wrong right person we were impetuously swept away in such a tumult of emotion that we scarcely had strength left to think; we found ourselves living at the centre of a landscape on fire; trees, houses and objects burst into flames around us. And then all at once the fire had died down and there was nothing left but a few warm embers: there are so many burnt-out landscapes behind us that we cannot even count them. Now nothing around us is on fire. For weeks and months we spend our days with the right person without realising; only sometimes, the thought of the curve of his lips, of certain of his gestures and the intonation of his voice, produces a slight tremor

in our heart: but we don't think anything of such a slight, muffled tremor. The strange thing is that when we are with this person we always feel so well and at peace, able to breathe deeply, and our forehead which has been so wrinkled and grim for so long is suddenly smooth again; and we never tire of talking and listening. We realise that we have never had a relationship like this with any other human being; in time all human beings had seemed so inoffensive, so simple and small to us: but when we walk beside this person with his pace that is different from ours, and his severe profile, he has an infinite capacity to do to us everything that is good and everything that is evil. And yet we feel infinitely calm.

And we leave home and go to live with this person for ever; not because we are sure that he is the right person: in fact we are not entirely sure, and we always suspect that the right person for us is hiding away goodness knows where in the city. But we don't want to know where he is hiding; we feel that we have by now very little to say to him, because we say everything to this person – who is not perhaps the right person – with whom we now live; and we want to receive the good and the evil of our lives from this person and with him. Every now and then violent differences between us and this person erupt into

the open; and yet they are unable to destroy the infinite peace we have within us. After many years, only after many years, after a thick web of habits, memories and violent differences has been woven between us, we at last realise that he is, in truth, the right person for us, that we could not have put up with anyone else, that it is only from him that we can ask everything that the heart needs.

Now, in the new house where we have come to live, and that is ours, we don't want to be poor, in fact we are a little afraid of poverty: we feel a strange affection for the objects around us, for a table or for a rug – we, who were always spilling ink on our parents' rugs; this new affection of ours for a rug bothers us a little, we are a bit ashamed of it; sometimes we still go for walks at the edge of the city, but when we come home we carefully clean our muddy shoes on the doormat; and we feel a new kind of peace when we sit at home, under the lamp, with the shutters closed against the dark city. We no longer want friends very much, because we tell the person who lives with us all our thoughts, while we are eating soup at our well-lit table; it doesn't seem worth the effort to tell other people anything.

Our children are born, and the fear of poverty grows in us; indeed an endless number of fears – of every danger

or kind of suffering that could attack our children's mortal flesh and blood – grows in us. In the past we never thought of our own flesh and blood, our own body, as being frail and mortal: we were ready to hurl ourselves into the most unexpected adventures, we were always about to set off for the most distant places to live among lepers and cannibals; every possibility of wars and epidemics and cosmic catastrophes left us quite unmoved. We did not know that there could be such fear, such frailty, in our body: we never suspected that we could feel so bound to life by a chain of fear, of such heart-rending tenderness. How strong and free our past was, when we walked alone at will through the city! We felt such pity for the families we saw; the fathers and mothers with their prams out for a careful little Sunday stroll along the avenues seemed to us to be something so tedious and sad. Now we are one of those families, we go carefully along the avenues pushing our pram and we are not sad, in fact we could be said to be happy, though it is a happiness that is difficult to recognise in the midst of our panic that we could from one moment to the next lose it for ever: the baby in the pram we are pushing is so small, so weak, the love which binds us to him is so painful, so frightening! We are afraid of a breath of wind, of a cloud in the sky; isn't it going

to rain? We – who have been soaked and bareheaded with our feet in the puddles so often! Now we have an umbrella. And we would like to have an umbrella stand in the house, in the hall; the strangest desires come to us, desires we would never have dreamed we could have when we walked through the city alone and free; we would like an umbrella-stand and a coatrack, towels, a camping oven, a refrigerator. We don't go to the edge of the city any more; we go through the avenues, between villas and gardens; we are careful that our children have no contact with people who are particularly dirty or poor because we are afraid of lice and diseases; we flee from beggars.

We love our children in such a painful, frightening way that it seems to us we have never had any other neighbour, that we never could have any other. We are still not very used to our children's presence on the earth; we are still bemused and bewildered by their sudden appearance in life. We no longer have friends; or rather if our child is ill we think with loathing of those few friends we do have – it almost seems to us to be their fault because whilst we are in their company we are distracted from this unique heart-rending tenderness: we no longer have a vocation: we had a vocation, a profession that was dear to us, and now as soon as we give it half our attention we feel guilty

and rush back to this unique, heart-rending tenderness; a sunny day, a green landscape, signify for us only that our baby can get brown in the sun or play on the grass; we have lost every ability to think of ourselves or enjoy ourselves. We gaze at everything in a worried, suspicious way, we look to see that there are no rusty nails or cockroaches or other dangers for our baby. We want to live in clean, fresh countries, with clean animals and kindly people; the brutal universe that used to fascinate us does not fascinate us any more.

And how stupid we have become, we occasionally and regretfully think, as we look at our baby's head which is so familiar, familiar to us in a way that nothing else in the world has ever been, as we watch him while he is sitting making a little hill of earth with his pudgy fingers. How stupid, and small, and sluggish our thoughts have become, so small that they could be packed into a nutshell, and yet at the same time so tiring and suffocating! Where has the brutal universe that fascinated us gone, and where have the strength and vitality and freedom of our youth gone, and our eager discovery of things day by day, our resolute glorious gaze, our triumphant past? Where is our neighbour now? Where is God now? We only remember to talk to God when our baby is ill: then we tell him to

make all our teeth and hair drop out but to make our baby better. As soon as the baby is better we forget about God; we still have our teeth and hair and we resume our perty, tiring, sluggish thoughts again – rusty nails, cockroaches, fresh pastures, gruel. We have become superstitious too and are always warding off bad luck – we are sitting working, writing away, when suddenly we get up and put the light on and off three times in order to ward off bad luck because out of the blue we felt that only this would save us from a catastrophe. We refuse to suffer; we hear suffering approach us and we hide behind the armchair, behind the curtains, so that it won't find us.

But then suffering comes to us. We have expected it, but we don't recognise it at first: we don't call it by its real name at first. Stunned and incredulous, trusting that everything can be put right, we descend the steps of our house and close its door for ever; we walk through interminable dusty streets. They follow us and we hide; we hide in convents and in woods, in barns and in alleyways, in the holds of ships and in cellars. We learn to ask for help from the first passer-by; we don't know if he is a friend or an enemy, if he will want to help us or betray us; but we have no choice, and for a moment we trust our life to him. We also learn to give help to the first passer-by.

And we always keep alive our faith that in a while, in a few hours or a few days, we shall go back to our house with its rugs and lamps; we shall be comforted and consoled; our children will sit down to play with clean aprons on and red slippers. We sleep with our children in stations, on the steps of churches, in the doss-houses of the poor; we are poor, we think, but without any pride; little by little every trace of our childish pride disappears. We are really hungry and really cold. We no longer feel fear; fear has penetrated into us, it is one with our exhaustion; it is the arid, uncaring gaze with which we stare at things.

But at intervals, from the depths of our exhaustion, the awareness of things rises up in us again, and it is so sharp that it moves us to tears; perhaps we are looking at the earth for the last time. We have never before felt with such force the love that binds us to the dust in the street, to the high calls of the birds, to the laboured rhythm of our breathing: but we sense that we are stronger than that laboured rhythm, it seems so muffled within us, so distant, as if it were no longer ours. We have never loved our children so much, their weight in our arms, the touch of their hair on our cheeks; and yet we do not even feel fear for our children: we say to God that he will protect them if he wishes. We tell him to do as he wishes.

And now we are really adult we think one morning, as we look in the mirror at our lined, furrowed face; we look at it without pride, without any curiosity; with a little compassion. Once again we have a mirror within four walls: who knows, perhaps in a little while we shall also have a rug again, a lamp perhaps. But we have lost those who are dearest to us, and so what can rugs and red slippers mean to us? We learn to conceal and look after the objects that belonged to the dead; to go alone to the places where we went with them; to ask questions and hear the silence around us. We no longer fear death; every hour, every minute, we look at death and remember its great silence on the face that was dearest to us.

And now we are really adult we think, and we are astonished that this is what being an adult is – not in truth everything we believed as a child, not in truth self-confidence, not in truth the calm ownership of everything on earth. We are adult because we have behind us the silent presence of the dead, whom we ask to judge our current actions and from whom we ask forgiveness for past offences: we should like to uproot from our past so many cruel words, so many cruel acts that we committed when, though we feared death, we did not know – we had not yet understood – how irreparable, how irremediable,

death is: we are adult because of the silent answers, because of all the silent forgiveness of the dead which we carry within us. We are adult because of that brief moment when one day it fell to our lot to live when we had looked at the things of the world as if for the last time, when we had renounced our possession of them and returned them to the will of God: and suddenly the things of the world appeared to us in their just place beneath the sky, and the human beings too, and we who looked at them from the just place that is given to us: human beings, objects and memories – everything appeared to us in its just place beneath the sky. In that brief moment we found a point of equilibrium for our wavering life: and it seemed to us that we could always rediscover that secret moment and find there the words for our vocation, the words for our neighbour; that we could look at our neighbour with a gaze that would always be just and free, not the timid or contemptuous gaze of someone who whenever he is with his neighbour always asks himself if he is his master or his servant. All our life we have only known how to be masters and servants: but in that secret moment of ours, in our moment of perfect equilibrium, we have realised that there is no real authority or servitude on the earth. And so it is that now as we turn to that secret moment

we look at others to see whether they have lived through an identical moment, or whether they are still far away from it; it is this that we have to know. It is the highest moment in the life of a human being, and it is necessary that we stand with others whose eyes are fixed on the highest moment of their destiny.

We realise with astonishment that now we are adult we have not lost our old shyness when we are with our neighbour: life has not helped us to free ourselves from this shyness at all. We are still shy. Only, it doesn't matter; it seems that our claim to be shy has been conquered for us; we are shy without shyness, boldly shy. We shyly search within us for the right words. We are very pleased to find them, shyly but as it were without any trouble; we are pleased that we have so many words within us, so many words for our neighbour that we seem intoxicated with our own ease and naturalness. And the story of human relationships never ceases for us; because little by little they become all too easy for us, all too natural and spontaneous – so spontaneous and so undemanding that there is no richness, discovery or choice about them; they are just habit and complacency, a kind of intoxicated naturalness. We believe that we can always return to that secret moment of ours, that we can draw on the right words;

but it isn't true that we can always go back there, often our return there is false; we make our eyes glow with a false light, we pretend to be caring and warm towards our neighbour and we are in fact once more shrunken and hunched up in the icy darkness of our heart. Human relationships have to be rediscovered and reinvented every day. We have to remember constantly that every kind of meeting with our neighbour is a human action and so it is always evil or good, true or deceitful, a kindness or a sin.

Now we are so adult that our adolescent children have already started to look at us with eyes of stone; we are upset by it, even though we know only too well what that stare means; even though we remember only too well having stared in the same way. We are upset by it and we complain about it and whisper our suspicious questions, even though by now we know how the long chain of human relationships unwinds its long necessary parabola, and though we know all the long road we have to travel down in order to arrive at the point where we have a little compassion.

The Little Virtues

As far as the education of children is concerned I think they should be taught not the little virtues but the great ones. Not thrift but generosity and an indifference to money; not caution but courage and a contempt for danger; not shrewdness but frankness and a love of truth; not tact but love for one's neighbour and self-denial; not a desire for success but a desire to be and to know.

Usually we do just the opposite; we rush to teach them a respect for the little virtues, on which we build our whole system of education. In doing this we are choosing the easiest way, because the little virtues do not involve any actual dangers, indeed they provide shelter