"Give us some information of a biographical nature on Mr. Burger's story, which we have just bought with pleasure," we demanded of the Kindly Editor, from whom we had recently Taken Over. "It isn't Mr. *Burger, it's* Mrs. *Burger," he said. "Ask her." We did. "As for autobiographical material," she replied; "Um." And continued, "Studied zoology, sculpture, English, in four colleges, incl. Bennington and Cornell. Husband is an editor and writer; we have two daughters, twelve and ten, an old house in the West Village, and a changeable menagerie of found animals. Have published a book, stories, several poems, and (mostly) book reviews. Began reading science fiction in 1941, but only recently started writing it. Work mostly at night, and most of the stories began as dreams, which I try to transcribe exactly as dreamed. Next to poetry, I find science fiction a good, terse and un-ordinarily-limited way of saying what one means . . . I hope to have some other stories along soon." We are sure that, having read this fine story, you will hope so, too.*

LOVE CHILD

by Otis Kidwell Burger

How I distrust words! They hurry down my page, isolated epitaphs on tombstones, each burying a once-live thought; the fleeting reality of a personal history smothered, at each encounter, by the older dark dignity of Mankind's tongues. Why is it so rarely possible to speak without editing, translating?

It is my job to translate, French books for an American press, in Paris. And sometimes, in the midst of my mechanical decoding, rarely and suddenly transfixed by some phrase, some fragment from another's consciousness upthrust into my own, I rise and pace my booklined study, hearing the sounds of spring, Paris, the chil-

dren playing, ticking away outside, like clocks. What are words? The most meaningful part of life are these apparently aimless moments. Not work, or words, but boredom, laughter, drunken nights, accidents, shape our lives. For in these unguarded moments, the dark pressure within bubbles a little closer to the surface, to be heard at last, known without conscious knowing, by the unsleeping inner ear.

So the most guarded of us know ourselves only in dreams; and some, only in broken dreams. As a glass, smashed in some dark corner, will often leave shards that pierce one's foot days, months, later . . .

It was spring in Paris; pink horse chestnuts in bloom, nursemaids and children with sailboats in the parks; children playing skipping games behind Notre Dame. The shop girls in tight skirts, the flower stalls, bookstalls, Seine water, the yellowed old stones themselves, all burnished and alight in the sun of another season.

All five of the children were living in my apartment at that point: my two, Denise and Delia, and Gerard's Debbie, Robert, and the baby, Melissa. My American husband, Paul, was away on a business trip, as usual; and Gerard's French wife, Miranda, in the hospital after an auto accident.

It is no accident that Gerard's children, and mine, are named so French-American, and alike. We are cousins, he and I, and grew up together. When his French father died, and his mother, my mother's sister, began her last long journey from one TB sanitarium to another, the child Gerard came to live with us, in the family house near Gramercy Park. We were a year apart, both only children, both dark, shy, awkward with other children and secretive with adults; and our first-look recognition of each other, beneath all the barriers of language and childhood, was instantaneous; startling as the encounter of one's image in an unexpected mirror. For ten years, we ate, played, talked with each other; sole children in a dark houseful of adults; wary and shy as foxes. Except with each other. And the green park that reminded him so of Paris, and home, slipped inside us both, a shared secret jungle, that grew to overshadow both our adult lives.

So that though we did not marry, due to a childish quarrel or misunderstanding, when Paul's business brought us to Paris years later, I did not, did not need to, look up Gerard. We met simply, accidentally, as I'd expected, in a park again, at a Punch and Judy show; he over his two children (Melissa was not then born), I over mine. A long quiet turning appraisal. And nothing to be said.

As Gerard had taught me French, so it was he that got me the job translating. Not so much to relieve my loneliness, whether Paul was away or not. Not for an excuse to see me, though the authors and publishers that eventually leavened Paul's dull business parties made it easier to meet Gerard, and Miranda too, on a social level; but that he and I both knew, I think, that healing lies in accepting, turning to use, one's splits.

And yet in those years, wrestling with words, there were times I cursed his wisdom. How long must one pay penance, face to face with one's fatal gift and fault. Or sense another presence, wise, untouchable, walking in and out of the rebellious thickets of words and heart . . . Well, we all suffer for what we are. I was glad for the other people he brought into that house, who spoke some of the double language I knew; and for being able to touch, if not with him, his Paris, his world.

It grew easier, in time. The real imaginary playmate merged into the simpler present; shared friends; and our children, visiting and playing together, as he and I had once done.

So that when Miranda lay mending her bones in the hospital, it seemed only natural, another curious evolution of the past, that Gerard's children should come to stay with me. Yet it was difficult. Both Gerard and Miranda had a streak of wildness in them; on holidays, they broke bones skiing, hunting; they became involved with odd people; there were wild parties, and auto accidents. And it was rumored she had cracked up, that last time, driving too fast after a quarrel. Their children, too, were wilder than mine. Dark, like myself and Gerard, and apt to mischief.

They came with a Negro maid, like our old Nurse, whom Gerard had hired to take Melissa to the park while the elder children were in school; but nevertheless my routine was much upset. It is difficult to sit over the typewriter all day, translating another's ideas, and in the afternoons and evenings, be mother and arbiter to a translated dream of one's own.

And mine, being American children, had also the stranger's wild sense of privilege and rule-breaking which Gerard's children, alas, only augmented. So that if, like proper French children, they often started off to the park, properly white-gloved and in file, on an afternoon, they often escaped from Selma, to return draggled, riotous, as impossible to subdue as laughing savages (or dreams themselves).

Sitting over the supper table, with Gerard's children and mine newly washed, aligned finally, properly, on opposite sides of the table as they should be, as life had

decreed; or putting them to bed at night; I arbitrated strange wars. What had joined one generation lay dissonant between the next. Five warm little bodies clung to me at night; but fended off me, each other, by day. As I, them.

As if children are aspects of memory, each holding some seed of past, to blossom in different future. . .

It was on one such spring afternoon that the children came back from the Park, as usual, wild; I heard Nanny Selma fussing over them, washing up. And then the silence as they were put into the playroom for the hour before supper. I listened from, and went back to, my typewriter. But some quality of silence from the playroom (how any change of tempo from an accepted rhythm can derange!) disturbed me. I went down the hall, opened the door, and first saw Binky.

He was sitting in the middle of them; the center, the reason of, silence. Not so big as Robert, but more compact, as small people grow into, rearrange themselves into maturity in a smaller scale; not yet ten, perhaps, and blonde like my bigger, more blooming children, but with something wise and already set about him. Eyes dark and sad as Gerard's. His clothes, too, were enigmatic, of no time or place; long grey trousers, a jacket, and a Fauntleroy flowing bowtie.

I stared. He, more polite, did not. After a moment, Denise saw fit to introduce him.

"This is Binky. We found him in the Park this afternoon."

"Very well." One is always polite to found playmates. "But it is nearly supper-time. Remind him when it is time to go home."

Debbie and Delia explained immediately that Binky was lost, could not go home, and that (therefore) this home was his. Their reasons enlarged chiefly on their reasons for so believing; Robert remained quiet. Binky and Melissa played with the blocks.

(Play! Out of my eye's corner I saw suddenly. With two colors of blocks, and not many of those, he created landscapes; de Chirico hollow worlds, Piranesi tormented labyrinths. Three blocks and an arch for a haunted building, and a no-color block stranded outside it, alone with its shadow.) Melissa sat by him, criticising without words. He nodded, obeyed. But when he saw I was about to address him directly, he swept all his private worlds away, and sat quietly to listen.

"But surely your parents must be worried." No response, except the grey flicker in his eyes. I tried French, without success. Then my phrase-book Italian. Then a few words of German. This exhausted my vocabularies, except the one I was afraid to use.

Melissa explained, in piping

French, that his parents were out and would not begin to worry until later, and perhaps Binky should have supper with the others.

So I (as one does when at a loss with children) sent them all into the bathroom to wash up again. And a moment later, hearing exclamations of delight and wonder, opened the door. I had a distinct impression that the bathroom had sprouted fountains; not as children create fountains by thumb-pressing a faucet, but simply that there *were* fountains, as Tivoli has fountains, as some ancient mental connection with the idea of water creates fountains, with fauns and nymphs, green-grass and trees, around and about. More of Binky's landscapes, no doubt. Shaken, I closed the door.

And presently he came out amidst them, as immaculate and smiling as he had gone in, and we all sat down at the candle-lit dinner table, in the dusk, over our cut fruit; Binky in the place-of-honor on my right, and Robert, for once, in Paul's empty seat at the head of the table.

(Names, places; what power they have over us. Did I marry a blonde American for his near-French name? And whose rightful place was Gerard's dark ten-year-old, with his almost American name, filling?) I closed my eyes over grace, trying to see not the children, but the archtypal images behind them; the loves and needs and misdirections that had produced that moment.

And opened them to Binky, politely passing me the bread.

How self-possessed, curiously pale, calm, and silent, Binky sat through that meal. Unchildlike. And as ghostly-white as the overripe peonies in the table's center. While Robert, who had inherited all Miranda's taut dislike and impatience for people, secrets she did not understand, glowered at us from the other end.

(Chic, with a Frenchwoman's worldliness and possession, she had once tried to make me her confidante 'as Gerard's almost sister'; feeling me out, putting me in place, with the refined cruelty and curiosity of a child; and for that moment, I hated her. One does not share secrets learned from the same, but forbidden, source.)

Binky's stillness shone eery by contrast. He seemed not so much to eat his food, as to absorb it; as though he'd done away with the mechanics of knife-fork-teeth-palate. Or as though food, like other people's thoughts, merely flowed into him, and he grew and ate invisibly.

So that when, at the meal's end, I resumed finally the subject of his parents, I was not wholly surprised when he replied, in perfect English,

"My parents will find me, when they are ready for me. They always do."

"So you do speak English."

He gave me that odd, still-center look of his, and nodded. I have seen no children, and few adults, capable of radiating that sense of being the middle-connection of an infinite number of power lines; as if the restless waiting in which most of us spend our lives had been, in him, translated into an acute knowledge of being the emptied focus of other people's waiting. Through which, all other powers must pass on their way to being.

Later, in the playroom, I overheard him speaking flawless French to the other children. Children learn other languages, slip between them, forget them, more quickly than adults. But when Selma came in to shoo them out, saying,

"Now you-all, go out in the yard awhile, whiles I tidy up," and Binky answered, in the same Southern lilt, I remembered that he'd caught, too, not only my language but my tone; and not only the children's French, but their pidgen-quick, shrill accents. Too quickly for ordinary mimicry. As if it were the tone of mind itself he'd caught, and merely spilled over into the appropriate language.

Well, mimicry, and the tone-reading of human beings, is the child's genius; the adult's failing is in reading larger meanings into such things. Past the middle of our lives, we look for signs and portents in others' most ordinary insights; as if habit, the encroaching dark, the walls we build between ourselves and the essential mystery and complexity of being could be broken back into again if only we had a child's clarity, or some other key . . . lost; what is it we lose? Binky knew.

As some beings can slip under all languages.

But as I stood in the empty, dusk and flower-filled apartment, trying to explain him to myself, listening to Selma tidying in the playroom, and watching the children evolving some new game in the courtyard two stories below. I felt I had less and less of the key.

Myself alive. Two arms, two legs, and a head to move them. And a mystery in between. The body that had begotten two children, a machine unknown; as secret in its uses as all mind's undercurrents. One's limbs, like cranes, reach out and move a fragment of world; and one's image of oneself, and a slim bundle of mechanical mental talents, moves them. It is not as simple as it is for children, who move all of a piece. Or as it is for a Binky, who know all others' reasons for moving.

But past acts leave a small shadow, an ineradicable stain that works into the fabric of our being.

If (as the wind blew the long curtains in the window) Gerard's

mistresses, his and Miranda's accidents, were because of me? I knew, and did not wish to know. She had him; I did not; and past a certain point, there is no use in untangling, or in being saint, or overseer, of others' lives. That was done.

We had been good hosts to parties and children, Paul and I. Better than Gerard and Miranda. Nor can one despise a bedmate, someone known in its fairest and frailest moments; all people have complex rights, devolving from the very fact of their existence.

But what (as the dusk settled over the lovely city, into the corners of the apartment), what, in middle age, as one's powers of taboos wrinkle over into the long wait for death, is taboo any longer? Our understanding alters, as we grow older. The walls close; and the dragons come back. And we no longer have teeth, reason, to defend ourselves. In the approaching dark, all cats are grey. All weakness, carried long enough, a possible strength.

What barriers between us had Gerard and I not crossed already, in our minds?

So I stood, still, inward, when Gerard came into the darkened apartment and stood beside me at the window.

"Miranda is better today. She threatens to be out soon, and wonders what you are doing with the children." He stood apart, with no greeting. The tone and scent of his tiredness filled the room. Below us, in the courtyard, the children trotted on mysterious errands. "I see they have found a new playmate."

"Or Binky has found them." I stood, silent, near the window.

No, it had not been a childish quarrel. He had been just 21; back in Paris, having inherited his dead mother's house. And I, 20. My mother, knowing, had brought me there to see him, and other relatives. But the strangeness of place, of a year's separation, of a whole childhood's relation . . . oh; seeing him there, stripped of the safeness of childhood, I had seen the whole shock of him; ourselves new, adult; the taboo of cousin-marriage and incest, heightened in us, so long together. To touch self in another? Hold life, knowledge, that close? So, young, frightened, I had quarreled with him, and gone home. A year later, he married. And I, lost, married too.

"A strange friend," Gerard said, noticing how the curtains shook under my hand, remembering.

"Binky? Yes. I have noticed him all these . . . all afternoon. He is a stray. He ate with us, and was most polite and . . . Oh, Gerard. Why is it some people remind us so profoundly of something familiar, and forgotten? That's Binky's talent. And I must find his parents, get him home before nightfall."

"He is lost?"

"I don't know. He doesn't, or won't, remember where he came from. So how in hell (Paul's phrase; as though I were invoking some god of law and order) can I get him home? The police, perhaps."

Had my face whitened? He dropped his eyes to his toes. "What is it you fear in him?"

"His strangeness. He is like . . . a child from another planet. Do you believe in such things?"

"No." He sighed, and after moment added in a low voice, to himself, "There is enough magic and strangeness in people, without invoking outside powers. Love, birth, death . . . these human magics may seem mere tricks, if explained, yet still leave residues of question. Why should we be so eternally desirous of being fooled by lesser magics? We know what we know by private dictionaries; but just these primal emotions are what people want translated away . . ."

"Gerard . . ."

"No." He put up to me, first that thin-boned dark hand, with its brush of black hair just below each knuckle; then the dark, too-fine face, all skull and fur; and the big, gentle eyes. Gerard. He is a human stripped to essence. Skin, fur, eye; and mind. To meet him, eye to eye, is to feel the full shock of bareness. As, to see Binky is to sense complexity. "No," said Gerard, stopping short of touching me. "Look, Melissa."

(Have I said, the name of his youngest was his childhood private name for me? We had avoided knowing it, till then, he and I), and I looked.

The court was bare, except for a stone lion, and some plantings of flowers, and three linden trees, which were then blossoming.

And, as the children ran now, in some game, Binky hesitated; and then, plucking a stone from one of the flower-bed edgings, carried it with him as he ran, as a diver carried a weight, lest he float to the water's surface. In the twilight, his cropped blonde head, his seriousness, shone like a strange star.

And now the children lined up, 12345, palings on an eternally dividing fence.

"No, look," Gerard's hand clamped on my arm. "Not from another planet. From a dream. Whose dream, Melissa?"

Now the children were jumping the stone lion, challenging Binky. Even at that distance, I saw the excited fright in them. Like that of children left out too late, at a party, in a strange city. No . . . the furious gleeful fright of children challenging one another, and one special one, to some shameful, miraculous display of weakness, by which the others will finally regain a lost mastery. Or find something new.

And Binky, serious, stood a moment. And put down his stone. He looked round at them. And then, quite gravely, and intent, lifted his arms and flew over the stone lion. And then turned and, less self-consciously, lifted himself like a diver in the quiet dark air, and flew back again.

Standing again, on the far side, he waited for them to judge him. And, after a moment's conference together, they applauded him cautiously. And looked at him again. For more.

This time, after some thought, he raised the lion a foot or two; and, thinking better of it, put it back, and quickly raised Melissa. Overjoyed, she spread her arms like a Christmas card cherub; sailed for a moment among linden blossoms falling like snow; and came back to earth breathless, rosy.

Now the others begged a turn; all save Robert, who stood apart, dark, sullen. Debbie went up; then my two, less high, less gracefully. Then, with a quick disclaiming gesture, Binky brought them to earth and left himself at their command.

I could see the next game begin, in their whispered conference; it would be a summoning. And yes, now, while Gerard's thin hand tightened like a vise on my black sleeve, my flesh, my bone, the creatures came out of the shadowy wood of three trees below. Rabbit, squirrel, fox; and, as their imaginations grew bolder, a peacock, in full display. A deer, dappled, full-crowned. A vast elephant. A striped tiger. All pacing, shadowy, visible, across the flat-hewn flagstones, to disappear in shadow as they touched the spiky black fence that separated courtyard from narrow street beyond.

And now . . .

"No," Gerard said. "No, no, now you must stop them, Melissa. Now it must not . . ." He flung back the window; the shattered glass struck the flagstones in an explosion, like hail; and the dim terrible shape that had been gathering behind the flowering trees, hesitated, and reabsorbed itself quietly.

And Binky, with a last quiet glance up at us, walked very slowly across the stone courtyard and also passed, like his creations, through the palings of the fence, and melted into all the roads beyond.

Gerard shut the curtains with a furious shudder.

"But why. . . ?"

"Selma," he shouted. "Selma, bring the children in." The roar of his voice, for once, filled the apartment.

"But why. . . ?"

"Because." He turned, still wrenched with fury. "What do children, and dreams, reach out for past wish? And this was not a child's dream. Nightmare. Horror, Melissa; chaos, death lust, the

archetypal figures we all carry deep even under the sweet half-layer desires of flight, escape. Do you want them all eaten up, Melissa? The children that stand between me and you?"

"No, no, What are you talking of?"

"Don't you know who Binky is, was?"

"No, no . . ." He had been shaking me, as a terrier shakes a rat, or a nightmare the dreamer. Now I fell, spent, against my half of the curtains. "No, Gerard." Seeing still, in my mind's eye, that small, central figure, resigned, all-knowing, and regretful, walk off-stage into the dusk. "No, Gerard. Who was Binky, then?"

He left me abruptly; turned into the darkness of the room, where I could not see him. And over the shrill sounds of the children, scrambling up the stair, and Selma's low voice, scolding them; his voice, cracked with compassion and a terrible sorrow, said, from shadow, "Your child and mine, Melissa. Didn't you know him?"

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