

A.E. STURGES

ACCUSER AND ACCUSED

It's time to take stock.

Of what?

Everything. Everything that matters.

Why now?

Because, in the past, every time the subject has been raised, you've found something else to occupy your mind.

Is there anything odd about being busy?

No.

Or in thinking of the future instead of raking over the past?

The past is important too. What we are at any given moment is the product of our past.

You're quite a philosopher.

I'd just say I'm trying to be honest. To face facts; not bury them.

Why not let things be. Take each day as it comes. 'Every morn a fresh beginning; every day a world made new'.

It's a matter of time. No one is immortal.

I don't see the relevance.

Or don't want to. The point is that one should get things straight before it's too late.

I'm nearly sixty, not ninety.

No one knows when the final whistle will blow. Life's not a game of football, with a fixed time limit.

There is such a thing as life expectancy.

Yes. But the figures are determined by the ends of the scale as well as the middle. No one knows if he's the average. Averages are funny things.

How come?

You can drown in a river that has an average depth of an inch.

You're smart on these mathematical marvels. So you

should be smart enough to know that I'm not at the low end – I'm past it.

Agreed. But that doesn't mean, necessarily, that you're at the high end. Your whistle might be due to blow now.

Hardly likely.

It never seems likely to him it blows for.

I can't say I'm terribly concerned.

You should be.

Why?

Haven't you got things to straighten out?

With whom?

Yourself.

Should I have?

Surely you wouldn't claim that there's nothing in your past that won't bear close inspection.

I didn't say that.

You didn't say anything. I'm saying that there are things you need to answer.

Answer to whom?

To me.

I don't know what you're on about.

I think I could convince you that you do.

Try.

Here goes. Do you remember a girl named **Monica Brown**?

Monica Brown. Where? How long ago?

Do you remember when we lived at Hartford?

Of course. It was where I started school. We used to collect shells from the beach and take them to school to learn to count. There was a lot of kelp on the beach, too, washed up by storms, and we'd play with it, and pop the bulbs.

Very interesting. But let's forget for the moment the beach and the shells and the kelp. Do you remember the corner shop?

Yes; with the big box with the glass top and the glass front, and the hundreds of different lollies. Silver sammys, chocolate frogs, liquorice

Yes. But let's leave the lollies for the time being. I wanted to know if you remember the people next to the shop. They had two English collies.

I'll say I do. Seeing that one bit me on the leg.

That's right. But it was the people I had in mind, the ones who owned the dogs. Mr and Mrs Brown. Monica was their daughter. The youngest in the family.

With dark hair; is that the one?

That's the one. Dark hair, worn in two plaits. Each tied at the end with a bow of coloured ribbon.

So what about her?

She used to play with Emmy.

OK, so she played with Emmy.

And sometimes you'd join in.

So?

And one day, when you joined in, you gave Emmy three-pence to go to the shop and buy some lollies.

What's wrong with that? I always shared them round.

Sure, sure. I'm not questioning your generosity.

What *are* you questioning?

Your motive.

Surely my motive would be to get lollies to eat.

Not really.

What then?

To be alone with Monica.

Whatever for?

To put your hand up her dress.

Oh, for Christ's sake. We were kids. We wouldn't know what we were doing.

You knew it was something you weren't supposed to do.

Who says?

Otherwise you wouldn't have sent Emmy away.

There could have been no connection.

But there was. And you know there was.

OK. Let's say there was, and I did. So; I was a kid who did something naughty. What's so unusual about that? You find me any kid who hasn't done something naughty.

I'm not concerned with any kid. Just you.

Get on with it, then. But for Christ's sake let's forget the little girls.

Right. Let's talk about another shop.

What shop?

Do you remember the shop in Lanning Avenue?

I should do. Seeing that I passed it twice a day, going to school, and coming home.

Right. Do you remember stealing from that shop?

No.

Think.

I have.

There were displays of fruit in the window, remember?

Yes.

And bars of chocolate in cardboard boxes on the counter.

I'll take your word for it.

And if the shop-keeper (old Thommo) went to the window for fruit, the shelves on the back of the counter formed a screen between him and the chocolate bars.

So?

One day you asked for an orange, and while he was getting it you filched a couple of chocolate bars.

You're going back a long way.

You've got a good memory.

For some things.

You mean, not for the things you want to forget. Like the chocolate bars. And the lizards.

Lizards! What are you on about now?

You remember when Mary worked at Hampden Valley.

Of course.

And you used to go over in the weekend to get the English papers for her for Mum.

I do. I rode my bike.

And, once inside the gates, you'd get off your bike, and push it along the drive.

Correct.

The uphill side of the drive was a hand-made stone wall.

I remember.

And on sunny days there'd be lots of lizards, basking on the rocks.

I suppose.

You remember them, all right. You'd quietly put your bike down, and throw stones at the lizards.

All boys throw stones.

Sometimes, either by luck, or because you did it so often, you'd score a direct hit. What a mess. A writhing dying lizard, its guts spread over the stones.

There are worse things than killing lizards.

Maybe. I'm not on at you simply for killing something. But for killing it for no reason. Gratuitously. There was no need. We kill things to eat; a case can be made out for that. We kill things that menace or endanger us; snakes, crocodiles, spiders, sharks. But lizards. We don't eat them. They're no danger to us. They're just harmless forms of life.

I was only a boy.

Yes. And you have owned up to it. At other times you've done the opposite.

What are you getting at now?

At times you've tried to dodge responsibility. To the extent of letting others come under suspicion.

When?

Remember the thermometer?

I remember quite a few.

The thermometer in the machine.

Machine?

The motor-generator set in the converting station.

Christ, what a memory.

I remember it well because of shift work. I hated night shift. Going off to work when I felt I could sleep forever. Eating when everyone else was sleeping. Sleeping, or trying to, when the rest of the world was busy. Including postmen blowing whistles, and barking bloody dogs . . . But to get back to the thermometer.

If we must.

You put it back in the holder though you thought it was cracked.

I wasn't certain.

You must have been pretty sure, the careful way you replaced it.

I don't remember that.

Think.

Anyway, that sort of thing is common.

It shouldn't be.

It's just the way of things. Of life. Everything acts to make you that way — society, the environment, economic conditions, the lot. You have to look after yourself; no one else will.

The easy way out.

What's the hard way?

I wouldn't call it the hard way. I'd just call it the way.

What is this way?

To take responsibility for what you are and what you do. Everything?

I wouldn't go that far. One can't be responsible for who his parents are or where and when he was born, or the colour of his hair and eyes.

Your tolerance is overwhelming.

When it comes to a person's thoughts, attitudes and actions, then that person is responsible for them, and should accept that responsibility. A man is what he thinks and does.

You sound like an existentialist.

I take that as a compliment.

A lot wouldn't.

A lot are not worth worrying about.

That's a superior bloody attitude.

It's a responsible attitude.

It puts too much on a man. Most men would crack up.

To my way of thinking it could have the opposite effect. If a man faced what he had done, and came to terms with himself, he would have peace of mind. And probably would be more tolerant to others.

Seems odd to me, to be tolerant to others, but hard on yourself.

Think about it. Imagine if everyone had that attitude. Wouldn't it be a better world to live in?

But what if the few adopted that attitude and the many didn't. The few would be the suckers.

I disagree. In the final analysis, it's what a man thinks of himself that matters. If someone thinks highly of him, but he knows he is not worthy of that regard, it won't give him much joy.

Well . . .

Time to get up.

Ah, a few more minutes.

Don't tell me you're going to miss out on breakfast again. Just because you don't get out of bed when you should.

Why 'should'?

Well, you have to get to work on time.

I'll get there . . . There, I'm out. Now, what's for breakfast?

Ah, there's an egg. Only one, but that'll do, with a slice of toast. Eggcup, spoon, plate, knife, cup, saucer. Makes it easy when one's alone; no one else to worry about.

