

# WARLIGHT

By Michael Ondaatje

## Excerpted from Chapter 1

In 1945 our parents went away and left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals. We were living on a street in London called Ruvigny Gardens, and one morning either our mother or our father suggested that after breakfast the family have a talk, and they told us that they would be leaving us and going to Singapore for a year. Not too long, they said, but it would not be a brief trip either. We would of course be well cared for in their absence. I remember our father was sitting on one of those uncomfortable iron garden chairs as he broke the news, while our mother, in a summer dress just behind his shoulder, watched how we responded. After a while she took my sister Rachel's hand and held it against her waist, as if she could give it warmth.

Neither Rachel nor I said a word. We stared at our father, who was expanding on the details of their flight on the new Avro Tudor I, a descendant of the Lancaster bomber, which could cruise at more than three hundred miles an hour. They would have to land and change planes at least twice before arriving at their destination. He explained he had been promoted to take over the Unilever office in Asia, a step up in his career. It would be good for us all. He spoke seriously and our mother turned away at some point to look at her August garden. After my father had finished talking, seeing that I was confused, she came over to me and ran her fingers like a comb through my hair.

I was fourteen at the time, and Rachel nearly sixteen, and they told us we would be looked after in the holidays by a guardian, as our mother called him. They referred to him as a colleague. We had already met him—we used to call him "The Moth," a name we had invented. Ours was a family with a habit for nicknames, which meant it was also a family of disguises. Rachel had already told me she suspected he worked as a criminal.

The arrangement appeared strange, but life still was haphazard and confusing

during that period after the war; so what had been suggested did not feel unusual. We accepted the decision, as children do, and The Moth, who had recently become our third-floor lodger, a humble man, large but moth-like in his shy movements, was to be the solution. Our parents must have assumed he was reliable. As to whether The Moth's criminality was evident to them, we were not sure.

I suppose there had once been an attempt to make us a tightly knit family. Now and then my father let me accompany him to the Unilever offices, which were deserted during weekends and bank holidays, and while he was busy I'd wander through what seemed an abandoned world on the twelfth floor of the building. I discovered all the office drawers were locked. There was nothing in the wastepaper baskets, no pictures on the walls, although one wall in his office held a large relief map depicting the company's foreign locations. Mombasa, the Cocos Islands, Indonesia. And nearer to home, Trieste, Heliopolis, Benghazi, Alexandria, cities that cordoned off the Mediterranean, locations I assumed were under my father's authority. Here was where they booked holds on the hundreds of ships that travelled back and forth to the East. The lights on the map that identified those cities and ports were unlit during the weekends, in darkness much like those far outposts.

At the last moment it was decided our mother would remain behind for the final weeks of the summer to oversee the arrangements for the lodger's care over us, and ready us for our new boarding schools. On the Saturday before he flew alone towards that distant world, I accompanied my father once more to the office near Curzon Street. He had suggested a long walk, since, he said, for the next few days his body would be humbled on a plane. So we caught a bus to the Natural History Museum, then walked up through Hyde Park into Mayfair. He was unusually eager and cheerful, singing the lines *Homespun collars, homespun hearts, Wear to rags in foreign parts*, repeating them again and again, almost jauntily, as if this was an essential rule. What did it mean? I wondered. I remember we needed several keys to get into the building where the office he worked in took up that whole top floor. I stood in front of the large map, still unlit, memorizing the cities that he would fly over during the next few nights. Even then I loved maps. He came up behind me and switched on the lights so the mountains on the relief map cast shadows, though now it was not the lights I noticed so much as the harbours lit up in

pale blue, as well as the great stretches of unlit earth. It was no longer a fully revealed perspective, and I suspect that Rachel and I must have watched our parents' marriage with a similar awed awareness. They had rarely spoken to us about their lives. We were used to partial stories. Our father had been involved in the last stages of the earlier war, and I don't think he felt he really belonged to us.

As for their departure, it was accepted that she had to go with him: there was no way, we thought, that she could exist apart from him—she was his wife. There would be less calamity, less collapse of the family if we were left behind as opposed to her remaining in Ruvigny Gardens to look after us. And as they explained, we could not suddenly leave the schools into which we had been admitted with so much difficulty. Before his departure we all embraced our father in a huddle, The Moth having tactfully disappeared for the weekend.

So we began a new life.

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The Moth, our third-floor lodger, was absent from the house most of the time, though sometimes he arrived early enough to be there for dinner. He was encouraged now to join us, and only after much waving of his arms in unconvincing protest would he sit down and eat at our table. Most evenings, however, The Moth strolled over to Bigg's Row to buy a meal. Much of the area had been destroyed during the Blitz, and a few street barrows were temporarily installed there. We were always conscious of his tentative presence, of his alighting here and there. We were never sure if this manner of his was shyness or listlessness. That would change, of course. Sometimes from my bedroom window I'd notice him talking quietly with our mother in the dark garden, or I would find him having tea with her. Before school started she spent quite a bit of time persuading him to tutor me in mathematics, a subject I had consistently failed at school, and would in fact continue to fail again long after The Moth stopped trying to teach me. During those early days the only complexity I saw in our guardian was in the almost three-dimensional drawings he created in order to allow me to go below the surface of a geometry theorem.

If the subject of the war arose, my sister and I attempted to coax a few stories from him about what he had done and where. It was a time of true and false recollections, and Rachel and I were curious. The Moth and my mother referred to people they both were familiar with from those days. It was clear she knew him before he had come to live with us, but his involvement with the war was a surprise, for The Moth was never “war-like” in demeanour. His presence in our house was usually signalled by quiet piano music coming from his radio, and his current profession appeared linked to an organization involving ledgers and salaries. Still, after a few promptings we learned that both of them had worked as “fire watchers” in what they called the Bird’s Nest, located on the roof of the Grosvenor House Hotel. We sat in our pyjamas drinking Horlicks as they reminisced. An anecdote would break the surface, then disappear. One evening, soon before we had to leave for our new schools, my mother was ironing our shirts in a corner of the living room, and The Moth was standing hesitant at the foot of the stairs, about to leave, as if only partially in our company. But then, instead of leaving, he spoke of our mother’s skill during a night drive, when she had delivered men down to the coast through the darkness of the curfew to something called “the Berkshire Unit,” when all that kept her awake “were a few squares of chocolate and cold air from the open windows.” As he continued speaking, my mother listened so carefully to what he described that she held the iron with her right hand in midair so it wouldn’t rest on and burn a collar, giving herself fully to his shadowed story.

I should have known then.