

# One Hand Clapping

*Anthony Burgess*



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## Chapter 1

I was Janet Shirley, *née* Barnes, and my husband was Howard Shirley, and in this story he was nearly twenty-seven and I was just gone twenty-three. We lived on the Shortshawe Council Estate in North Bradcaster, Number 4 Cranmer Road off Whitgift Road which leads into town, and we paid thirty-two and six a week rent. Just up the road from us was, and is, I guess, Shoe Lane which was on the TV commercials as Shining Shoe Lane, which made all those who lived there very boastful in a silly way, as if they'd done something clever. All the roads on our side were named after bishops – Ridley Road, Latimer Road, Fisher Road and Laud Road – and there was never any call to use those in TV commercials. Howard worked at the Oak Crescent Used Car Mart and I helped to fill up the shelves at the Hastings Road Supermarket, so at the time there was nothing very special about us. We had a TV, a radio with a strap like a handbag for carrying round the house, a washing-machine, a vac, but no car of our own or children. We had been married since I was nineteen. That was not young in my family, my mother was married at sixteen and my sister Myrtle (Sadler) at seventeen. My sister Myrtle, as you'll see, made a mess of her marriage, but that was nothing to do with marrying young, she would

have made a mess at whatever age, marrying a man like Michael.

Howard and I met when I was still at the Hawthorn Road Secondary Modern School, only fifteen, and he had been out of the Grammar School three years. I looked older than I was, like most of the girls did, and as there wasn't a lot to learn in school we used to spend a lot of time on our appearance. I will say, though, that Miss Spenser took us twice a week for Make-up, Deportment and Dress Sense, but the poor old thing did not know much about it. Besides, it always seemed wrong to us girls to have something like that in a school, and that the tax-payer's money should be spent better. There was also Ballroom Dancing and what was called Homecraft. None of the teachers knew very much about what they taught and it was pathetic, sometimes, the way they tried to make our schooldays happy. There was young Mr Slessor with the beard who said he was a beatnik and called us cats and chicks. He was supposed to teach English but said like he didn't dig the king's jive. Crazy, man, real cool. It was pathetic. Mr Thornton, who taught history, said he knew we wouldn't be interested in all those old kings and queens so he just played his guitar and sang very dull songs, so we weren't allowed to have any history and I was good at that at the primary. Then there was old puffing and blowing Mr Portman, a portly man you could say, who took us for General Science, but he was a bit too fond of asking us girls to go round and help him in the little apparatus room, breathing hard on us. I hit him once but he never did anything about that. I came out of Hawthorn Road Secondary Mod knowing nothing, but

they always say that if you're a girl, and pretty like I was, you didn't need to know all that much. I could look smashing, though I say it myself, and I got whistled at, and I could do snappy back-answers, like when some boy said at a dance, 'What's cooking, good-looking?' you had to reply, 'Nothing spectacular, Dracula.' But sometimes they were so ignorant they didn't know what Dracula was, so you had to think of something else.

Howard wasn't like that, he was a serious boy and good at athletics. He was modest, really, despite being smashing-looking in a very dark way, and he used to say he hadn't the brains for the better class of jobs (which are not well-paid, anyway) and was better at practical things like car-engines than books and figures and the rest of the things that boys go in for when they've got G.C.E. Ordinary Level. Howard did very well in his G.C.E., but there was some trouble about his papers, because the examiners said he'd cribbed, just copying word for word from the books. But it was explained by his headmaster that Howard had one of those very unusual brains like a camera, it could sort of photograph things. It was really uncanny sometimes, the way his brain worked. You could give Howard anything to look at, as it might be a song or a page of a book or a list of names or anything like that, and he'd look at it then close his eyes and then speak out without making any mistakes what he'd read. He should really have been on the TV with it, which he was in a way later, as you'll see, but he always said it didn't mean cleverness or anything like that. It was only a photographic brain, he called it, and he said that a lot of people had it and it meant nothing at all.

We met because we were both keen on dancing, doing rock ‘n’ roll in a very athletic way, Howard throwing me over his shoulder and me doing the splits to loud applause, and all that sort of thing, so that we won one or two prizes and even went in for some of the big competitions, though at those we always seemed to get beaten by couples on holiday from Denmark or Sweden, very blonde and slim and sunburned all over. I was very blonde and slim too, but not in that sort of way, more in an English way, if you see what I mean, like some of the models on the TV commercials. I’ve always looked older than my years, and I never seemed to go through a real teenage stage, with pop-singer clubs and screaming and all that. I think that’s what appealed to Howard, not that I’ve ever been really *serious*, but I had a bit more sense than the others.

Howard didn’t say he loved me till about six months after we first met, and even then I used to go out with other boys – the local talent, I used to call it, but there wasn’t much of it really – but none of them was quite like Howard. Howard would look up at the moon and the stars and say, ‘Think of them being all those millions of miles away,’ and sometimes he’d give you the exact figures which his brain had taken a snapshot of. Howard had a deep voice and he could make it sound like Michael Denison. He could have been very good at selling things, that voice being a big help, but he never had much ambition. It was me who mentioned marriage first – I was sixteen at the time – but he said we’d have to wait. I said to Howard that he’d have to do better than just working at the Elm Street Garage, getting all oily and greasy, but he said the money was all right. We quarrelled

on and off about him having no ambition and we parted for a whole three months, me going round with one boy after another, and none of them much good with their off-beat finger-snapping to the music and their talk about getting the message and man, that sends me. It was like Mr Slessor at school all over again. I used to see Howard glooming about the town, all on his own, and when he started drinking (which I heard about) we had to make it up. Then, just after my seventeenth birthday, we got engaged. After that, we got down to seriously making plans and saving up, and Howard got this better job at the Oak Crescent Used Car Mart. We started making love more seriously than before, but I wouldn't let it get too serious, though time and again I was on the point of giving myself to him in the park, what we call the Clough, among the trees. Anyway, to cut a long story short, we got married when I was nineteen. It was a nice little white wedding at St Olave's with a reception afterwards at Horrocks's, port and sherry and a three-tiered cake from Renshaw's, and there we were kissing everybody and being kissed. This reception set my father back a bit, but he was earning good money at Baxendale's (foreman) and when his two daughters first came into the world he must have known he'd have all that expense sooner or later. Anyway, there we were, Howard and me, man and wife, let no man put asunder.

We had our name down for a council house, living in the meantime with my mother and father (Howard was a blitz orphan but brought up by his aunt in Tinmarsh). We didn't care for this sharing very much and the walls were very thin. We were lucky, though, because there wasn't too big a

waiting-list in Bradcaster, and it was a real thrill to get into our very own home with our own few sticks of furniture which we kept adding to. That's always a real pleasure, buying things for the home, and our presents to each other for a long time were coal-scuttles and kitchen-sets and things like that. We had a lot of things on the H.P., like most people, but Howard had a good clean job with basic wage and commission, and there I was helping to fill up the shelves at the Hastings Road Supermarket with baked beans and soapflakes. Whether we wanted children or not we couldn't make up our minds about, and Howard was always talking very seriously about the Threat of Another War and the Hydrogen Bomb and it not being fair to any child to bring it into the world these days. He got more and more serious when we were married and talked a lot about what he called his Responsibilities. I didn't take too much notice of what Howard said, but I couldn't make up my mind whether I wanted to be a mother or not. Sometimes in the evening when we sat looking at the TV, Howard in the fireside chair and me on the rug beside him, the feeling would come over me that it would be nice to have a little child upstairs calling down, 'Mummy.' This was especially during the commercials, showing mother and daughter both protected by the same soap, or the mother loving her children so much that she washed all their clothes in Blink or whatever it was (they're all the same, really) or the mother and father and little children sitting down to a good nourishing dinner of Somebody-or-other's Fish Fingers. But Howard and I had a good time together, dancing in the evenings or going to the flicks (which is only like a bigger

kind of more uncomfortable TV which you have to pay for), even though it wasn't what you would call an exciting sort of life. At week-ends sometimes Howard would borrow one of the cars from the Car Mart and we would go off into the country and have tea somewhere. Once or twice he borrowed a really big car – a Bentley, or Cadillac, or something, I don't know much about cars – and then we'd go to dinner at one of these hotels in one of the country towns miles away from Bradcaster, one of those places all low ceilings and brass on the walls and a smell of Oxo gravy everywhere, and for all anybody knew, me glamorous and Howard with his BBC voice and the big car outside, we could be somebody really big. We played it real cool, as poor Mr Slessor would say. That was nice now and again.

I could see that Howard fretted sometimes. As I said, he wasn't ambitious, but he said, once or twice, especially after some film or TV programme or something he'd read in the *Daily Window*, 'Oh, what will we ever see of the world?' or 'You ought to be dripping with real diamonds and be all wrapped up in mink.'

'Well,' I'd say, 'why don't you do something about it?' – not meaning that really, of course, because we really had a lot to be thankful for, what with a home and a TV and a bottle of port in the cupboard and bitter lemons in the pantry and able to go out now and again and live it up in a modest sort of way.

One night Howard said, very seriously, 'I'd never steal money, not because it's not right to steal, which it's not, but because it makes everything too easy. I mean, we're a bit old-fashioned where I work, and we just stuff cash into this very

old-fashioned till, and sometimes it's quite big sums. I could nick a couple of hundred just like that, then the two of us on the train to London or somewhere, and they'd never catch us. But it's not worth it. If we're to get money we're to get it honestly. If we ever get it at all we'll get it by luck, not by what you or I could do. Because what are we, really?

'Thanks very much,' I said in my sarky tone.

'No, no,' he said, frowning. 'You know what I mean. We don't have much to give to the world, talent or anything like that, I mean. We haven't got very much of anything that the world would fall over itself to want to buy. Besides, what I'd want for you is the real big money, the money so big you'd be able to light cigarettes with it.'

'You push on with the pools, my lad,' I said. 'Somebody's got to win.' We were doing Number 42 Litplan at the time.

'Oh, s—t on the pools,' Howard said, cross, and I was cross back, not liking that kind of language. The man at school who'd taught maths had gone in for that sort of language, thinking it made him popular with the boys. Mr Lithgow. 'What I mean is,' said Howard, 'is I'd like to live like a millionaire for, say, one month.'

'And then come back to the Used Car Mart?'

'No,' said Howard. He was always full of surprises. 'Then to snuff it, having tasted a bit of life. Because, when all's said and done, there's not all that much to live for, is there?'

'Thanks very much,' I said again.

'Yes, yes, I've got you to live for, and if I went off I'd want to have the two of us going off together, one flesh like it said in the marriage vows. Sometimes,' he said dreamily, 'when I'm at work and waiting for customers I think about the two

of us living like kings and not bothering about the future. Because there may not be any future to bother about, you know. Not for anybody, one of these days. And it's a wicked world.'

'It's not the world that's wicked,' I said. 'It's the people that's in it.' I had on the floor a 1s. 7d. box of Toffs, and I bulged out my cheek with one of these in it. Then, for some reason, and I'll never understand men, he smiled and was down on the rug hugging and kissing me, saying, 'Oh, you're marvellous.'

After a bit he said, 'It was just a thought, that's all. It's a question of your mood, I suppose, and how you're feeling.' I frowned at that, not understanding how that fitted in with anything, and then I said, looking at the ormolu clock we had bought very cheap, it being on the mantelpiece:

'It's time for *Over and Over*. Nearly, anyway.'

'What's that?' he said, getting up from the floor.

'Oh, I'd forgotten.' This was the first Thursday evening that Howard had been home for a long time, him having been in the habit of going to see his auntie at Tinmarsh, her living alone now with him married, and also not very well. But she was now in hospital at Rosscourt and that was much too far away for visiting. 'Oh,' I said, 'it's this quiz-show and it's this boy who's up for the thousand-pound question. On horse-racing it is.'

'That's a queer sort of thing for a boy to know anything about. Is he a stable-boy?'

'No, secondary mod like I was. The way I look at it, a young lad's got to fill his mind with something these days. That stands to reason, there not being much taught at school if my school was anything to go by.'

Howard switched on and then the set warmed up and then you could hear the voices whispering and then booming and then you could see the picture. It's always a bit of a thrill, that, when the voices start coming up, and it's always a bit of a shock and a surprise when you can see the picture. Like a miracle. This picture showed a very plump blonde singer and a very silly comedian. 'Oh, Christ,' said Howard, 'look at that. The wonders of modern science and the pleasures of bloody civilisation. God help the blasted lot of us.' He was in a real swearing mood this evening but I didn't say anything more because he was sweet as well.

'That'll be over in five minutes,' I said. The singer and the comedian were doing a kind of final number in night clothes, with a big cardboard moon up above, and she was wearing a toreador jama, very snazzy. Then they finished with a close-up of their back teeth on the last note, and we had the commercials. Fivepence off fish-cakes and threepence off Giant Size Splazz. Wait a bit longer and they'll give them away. And *our* washing-machine, two pound ten cheaper than when we bought it. Cheek. Then this quiz-show started. Howard watched it with interest. The quizmaster was a sort of American or Irishman, you couldn't be sure which, with a very pointy sort of face. A lot of rather ugly and silly people came on and were asked easy questions about things, the quiz-master being very good at helping them, a bit too much so, I thought. The studio audience went mad clapping when one stupid middle-aged couple got the right answer when the quiz-master said, 'Fill in the blank here. Salt, mustard, vinegar——' The couple looked at him, blank, so he said it again. 'Salt, mustard, vinegar——' Then the man of the