



VINTAGE

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# THE EASTER PARADE

RICHARD YATES

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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## THE EASTER PARADE

Richard Yates was born in 1926 in Yonkers, New York. After serving in the US Army during the Second World War, he worked as a publicity writer for the Remington Rand Corporation, and for a brief period in the sixties as a speech-writer for Senator Robert Kennedy. His prize-winning stories first appeared in 1953 and his first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, was nominated for the National Book Award in 1962. He is the author of eight other works, including the novels *A Good School*, *The Easter Parade* and *Disturbing the Peace*, and two collections of short stories, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* and *Liars in Love*. Richard Yates was twice divorced and the father of three daughters. He died in 1992.

## ALSO BY RICHARD YATES

*Revolutionary Road*

*Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*

*A Special Providence*

*Disturbing the Peace*

*A Good School*

*Liars in Love*

*Young Hearts Crying*

*Cold Spring Harbor*

*The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*

RICHARD YATES

# The Easter Parade

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

To Gina Catherine

## *Praise for The Easter Parade:*

'*The Easter Parade* is the best modern novel I have read this year'

Julian Barnes

'Few men since Flaubert have offered such sympathy to women whose lives are hell'

Kurt Vonnegut

'Richard Yates's best novel, which makes it wonderful. From the first sentence to the last ... I loved the book'

Joan Didion

'One of the United States' finest post-war novelists and short-story writers. He wrote some of the best fiction of his generation; it continues to give pleasure to all those readers who are fortunate enough to discover it'

*Independent*

'A brave, brilliant book'

*Sunday Herald*

'As touching as it is real, as beautiful as it is sad. Like a softer, subtler, less salty Updike, Yates expounds a poignant, suburban American realism'

*Time Out*

'A tour de force ... an unflinching novel of rare power'

Mordecai Richler

‘Invigorating and gripping ... every word works quietly to establish the illusion that things are happening by themselves ... A literary achievement’

*Time*

‘Richard Yates is a writer of commanding gifts. His prose is urbane yet sensitive, with passion and irony held deftly in balance. And he provides unexpected pleasures in a flood of freshly minted phrases and in the thrust of sudden insight, precise notation of feeling, and mordant unsentimental perceptions’

*Saturday Review*

‘America’s finest forgotten author ... a magnificent writer’

*The Times*

‘Yates is a master’

Sebastian Faulks

‘Yates is a realist par excellence. Read and weep’

Kate Atkinson

‘Wonderful’

Andre Dubus

‘The most perceptive author of the twentieth century ...

A magnificent writer’

*The Times*

‘One of the greatest American novelists of the twentieth century’

*Sunday Telegraph*

# **PART ONE**

## Chapter 1

Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents' divorce. That happened in 1930, when Sarah was nine years old and Emily five. Their mother, who encouraged both girls to call her 'Pookie,' took them out of New York to a rented house in Tenafly, New Jersey, where she thought the schools would be better and where she hoped to launch a career in suburban real estate. It didn't work out - very few of her plans for independence ever did - and they left Tenafly after two years, but it was a memorable time for the girls.

'Doesn't your father ever come home?' other children would ask, and Sarah would always take the lead in explaining what a divorce was.

'Do you ever get to see him?'

'Sure we do.'

'Where does he live?'

'In New York City.'

'What does he do?'

'He writes headlines. He writes the headlines in the New York *Sun*.' And the way she said it made clear that they ought to be impressed. Anyone could be a flashy, irresponsible reporter or a steady drudge of a rewrite man; but the man who wrote the headlines! The man who read through all the complexities of daily news to pick out salient points and who then summed everything up in a few well-chosen words, artfully composed to fit a limited space

- there was a consummate journalist and a father worthy of the name.

Once, when the girls went to visit him in the city, he took them through the *Sun* plant and they saw everything.

'The first edition's ready to run,' he said, 'so we'll go down to the pressroom and watch that; then I'll show you around upstairs.' He escorted them down an iron stairway that smelled of ink and newsprint, and out into a great underground room where the high rotary presses stood in ranks. Workmen hurried everywhere, all wearing crisp little squared-off hats made of intricately folded newspaper.

'Why do they wear those paper hats, Daddy?' Emily asked.

'Well, they'd probably tell you it's to keep the ink out of their hair, but I think they just wear 'em to look jaunty.'

'What does "jaunty" mean?'

'Oh, it means sort of like that bear of yours,' he said, pointing to a garnet-studded pin in the form of a teddy bear that she'd worn on her dress that day and hoped he might notice. 'That's a very jaunty bear.'

They watched the curved, freshly cast metal page plates slide in on conveyor rollers to be clamped into place on the cylinders; then after a ringing of bells they watched the presses roll. The steel floor shuddered under their feet, which tickled, and the noise was so overwhelming that they couldn't talk: they could only look at each other and smile, and Emily covered her ears with her hands. White streaks of newsprint ran in every direction through the machines, and finished newspapers came riding out in neat, overlapped abundance.

'What'd you think of that?' Walter Grimes asked his daughters as they climbed the stairs. 'Now we'll take a look at the city room.'

It was an acre of desks, where men sat hammering typewriters. 'That place up front where the desks are shoved together is the city desk,' he said. 'The city editor's the bald man talking on the telephone. And the man over there is even more important. He's the managing editor.'

'Where's your desk, Daddy?' Sarah asked.

'Oh, I work on the copy desk. On the rim. See over there?' He pointed to a big semicircular table of yellow wood. One man sat at the hub of it and six others sat around the rim, reading or scribbling with pencils.

'Is that where you write the headlines?'

'Well, writing heads is part of it, yes. What happens is, when the reporters and rewrite men finish their stories they give them to a copy boy - that young fellow there is a copy boy - and he brings them to us. We check them over for grammar and spelling and punctuation, then we write the heads and they're ready to go. Hello, Charlie,' he said to a man passing on his way to the water cooler. 'Charlie, I'd like you to meet my girls. This is Sarah and this is Emily.'

'Well,' the man said, bending down from the waist. 'What a pair of sweethearts. How do you do?'

Next he took them to the teletype room, where they could watch wire-service news coming in from all over the world, and then to the composing room where everything was set into type and fitted into page forms. 'You ready for lunch?' he inquired. 'Want to go to the ladies' room first?'

As they walked out across City Hall Park in the spring sunshine he held them both by the hand. They both wore light coats over their best dresses, with white socks and black patent-leather shoes, and they were nice-looking girls. Sarah was the dark one, with a look of trusting innocence that would never leave her; Emily, a head shorter, was blond and thin and very serious.

'City Hall doesn't look like much, does it?' Walter Grimes said. 'But see the big building over there through the trees? The dark red one? That's the *World* - was, I should say; it folded last year. Greatest daily newspaper in America.'

'Well, but the *Sun's* the best now, right?' Sarah said.

'Oh, no, honey; the *Sun* isn't really much of a paper.'

'It isn't? Why?' Sarah looked worried.

'Oh, it's kind of reactionary.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means very, very conservative; very Republican.'

'Aren't we Republicans?'

'I guess your mother is, baby. I'm not.'

'Oh.'

He had two drinks before lunch, ordering ginger ale for the girls; then, when they were tucking into their chicken à la king and mashed potatoes, Emily spoke up for the first time since they'd left the office. 'Daddy? If you don't like the *Sun*, why do you work there?'

His long face, which both girls considered handsome, looked tired. 'Because I need a job, little rabbit,' he said. 'Jobs are getting hard to find. Oh, I suppose if I were very talented I might move on, but I'm just - you know - I'm only a copy-desk man.'

It wasn't much to take back to Tenafly, but at least they could still say he wrote headlines.

'... And if you think writing headlines is easy, you're wrong!' Sarah told a rude boy on the playground after school one day.

Emily, though, was a stickler for accuracy, and as soon as the boy was out of earshot she reminded her sister of the facts. 'He's only a copy-desk man,' she said.

Esther Grimes, or Pookie, was a small, active woman whose life seemed pledged to achieving and sustaining an elusive quality she called 'flair.' She pored over fashion magazines, dressed tastefully and tried many ways of fixing her hair, but her eyes remained bewildered and she never quite learned to keep her lipstick within the borders of her mouth, which gave her an air of dazed and vulnerable uncertainty. She found more flair among rich people than in the middle class, and so she aspired to the attitudes and mannerisms of wealth in raising her daughters. She always sought 'nice' communities to live in, whether she could afford them or not, and she tried to be strict on matters of decorum.

'Dear, I *wish* you wouldn't do that,' she said to Sarah at breakfast one morning.

'Do what?'

'Dunk your toast crusts in your milk that way.'

'Oh.' Sarah drew a long, soaked crust of buttered toast out of her milk glass and brought it dripping to her reaching mouth. 'Why?' she asked after she'd chewed and swallowed.

'Just because. It doesn't *look* nice. Emily's four whole years younger than you, and *she* doesn't do baby things like that.'

And that was another thing: she always suggested, in hundreds of ways, that Emily had more flair than Sarah.

When it became clear that she would not succeed in Tenafly real estate she began to make frequent all-day trips to other towns, or into the city, leaving the girls with other families. Sarah didn't seem to mind her absences, but Emily did: she didn't like the smells of other people's homes; she couldn't eat; she would worry all day, picturing hideous traffic accidents, and if Pookie was an hour or two late in coming to get them she would cry like a baby.

One day in the fall they went to stay with a family named Clark. They brought their paper dolls along in case they were left to themselves, which seemed likely - all three of the Clark children were boys - but Mrs. Clark had admonished her oldest son Myron to be a good host, and he took his duties seriously. He was eleven, and spent most of the day showing off for them.

'Hey, watch,' he kept saying. 'Watch this.'

There was a horizontal steel pipe supported by steel stanchions at the far end of the Clarks' back yard, and Myron was very good at skinning-the-cat. He would run for the bar, his shirttail flapping beneath his sweater, seize it in both hands, swing his heels up under and over it and hang by the knees; then he'd reach up, turn himself inside out and drop to the ground in a puff of dust.

Later he led his brothers and the Grimes girls in a complicated game of war, after which they went indoors to examine his stamp collection, and when they came outside again there was nothing much to do.

'Hey, look,' he said. 'Sarah's just tall enough to go under the bar without touching it.' It was true: the top of her head cleared the bar by about half an inch. 'I know what let's do,' Myron said. 'Let's have Sarah run at the bar as fast as she can and she'll go skimming right under it, and it'll look really neat.'

A distance of some thirty yards was established; the others stood on the sidelines to watch, and Sarah started to run, her long hair flying. What nobody realized was that Sarah running would be taller than Sarah standing still - Emily realized it a fraction of a second too late, when there wasn't even time to cry out. The bar caught Sarah just above the eye with a sound Emily would never forget - *ding!* - and then she was writhing and screaming in the dirt with blood all over her face.

Emily wet her pants as she raced for the house with the Clark boys. Mrs. Clark screamed a little too when she saw Sarah; then she wrapped her in a blanket – she had heard that accident victims sometimes go into shock – and drove her to the hospital, with Emily and Myron in the back seat. Sarah had stopped crying by then – she never cried much – but Emily had only begun. She cried all the way to the hospital and in the hall outside the emergency room from which Mrs. Clark emerged three times to say ‘No fracture’ and ‘No concussion’ and ‘Seven stitches.’

Then they were all back at the house – ‘I’ve never seen *anyone* bear pain so well,’ Mrs. Clark kept saying – and Sarah was lying on the sofa in the darkened living room with most of her face swollen purple and blue, with a heavy bandage blinding one eye and a towelful of ice over the bandage. The boys were out in the yard again, but Emily wouldn’t leave the living room.

‘You must let your sister rest,’ Mrs. Clark told her. ‘Run along outside, now, dear.’

‘That’s okay,’ Sarah said in a strange, distant voice. ‘She can stay.’

So Emily was allowed to stay, which was probably a good thing because she would have fought and kicked if anyone had tried to remove her from where she stood on the Clarks’ ugly carpet, biting her wet fist. She wasn’t crying now; she was only watching her prostrate sister in the shadows and feeling wave on wave of a terrible sense of loss.

‘It’s okay, Emmy,’ Sarah said in that faraway voice. ‘It’s okay. Don’t feel bad. Pookie’ll come soon.’

Sarah’s eye wasn’t damaged – her wide, deep brown eyes remained the dominant feature in a face that would become beautiful – but for the rest of her life a fine little blue-white scar wavered down from one eyebrow into the

lid, like the hesitant stroke of a pencil, and Emily could never look at it without remembering how well her sister had borne pain. It reminded her too, time and again, of her own susceptibility to panic and her unfathomable dread of being alone.

## Chapter 2

It was Sarah who gave Emily her first information about sex. They were eating orange popsicles and fooling around a broken hammock in the yard of their house in Larchmont, New York - that was one of the other suburban towns they lived in after Tenafly - and as Emily listened her mind filled with confused and troubling images.

'And you mean they put it up *inside* you?'

'Yup. All the way. And it hurts.'

'What if it doesn't fit?'

'Oh, it fits. They make it fit.'

'And then what?'

'Then you have a baby. That's why you don't do it until after you're married. Except you know Elaine Simko in the eighth grade? She did it with a boy and started having a baby, and that's why she had to leave school. Nobody even knows where she is now.'

'You sure? Elaine Simko?'

'Positive.'

'Well, but why would she want to do a thing like that?'

'The boy seduced her.'

'What does that mean?'

Sarah took a long, slow suck of her popsicle. 'You're too young to understand.'

'I am not. But you said it *hurts*, Sarah. If it hurts, why would she—'

'Well, it hurts, but it feels good too. You know how sometimes when you're taking a bath, or maybe you put your hand down there and kind of rub around, and it feels —'

'Oh.' And Emily lowered her eyes in embarrassment. 'I see.'

She often said 'I see' about things she didn't wholly understand - and so, for that matter, did Sarah. Neither of them understood why their mother found it necessary to change homes so often, for example - they'd be just beginning to make friends in one place when they'd move to another - but they never questioned it.

Pookie was inscrutable in many ways. 'I tell my children everything,' she would boast to other adults; 'we don't have any secrets in this family' - and then in the next breath she would lower her voice to say something the girls weren't supposed to hear.

In keeping with the terms of the divorce agreement, Walter Grimes came out to visit the girls two or three times a year in whatever house they were renting, and sometimes he would spend the night on the living-room sofa. The year Emily was ten she lay awake for a long time on Christmas night, listening to the unaccustomed sound of her parents' voices downstairs - they were talking and talking - and because she had to know what was going on she acted like a baby: she called out for her mother.

'What is it, dear?' Pookie turned on the light and bent over her, smelling of gin.

'My stomach's upset.'

'Do you want some bicarbonate?'

'No.'

'What do you want, then?'

'I don't know.'

'You're just being silly. Let me tuck you in, and you just think about all the nice things you got for Christmas and go to sleep. And you mustn't call me again; promise?'

'Okay.'

'Because Daddy and I are having a very important talk. We're talking over a lot of things we should have discussed a long, long time ago, and we're coming to a new - a new understanding.'

She gave Emily a wet kiss, turned out the light and hurried back downstairs, where the talking went on and on, and Emily lay waiting for sleep in a warm flush of happiness. Coming to a new understanding! It was like something a divorced mother in the movies might say, just before the big music comes up for the fadeout.

But the next morning unfolded like all the other last mornings of his visits: he was as quiet and polite as a stranger at breakfast, and Pookie avoided his eyes; then he called a taxi to take him to the train. At first Emily thought maybe he had only gone back to the city to get his belongings, but that hope evaporated in the days and weeks that followed. She could never find the words to ask her mother about it, and she didn't mention it to Sarah.

Both girls had what dentists call an overbite and children call buck teeth, but Sarah's condition was the worse: by the time she was fourteen she could scarcely close her lips. Walter Grimes agreed to pay for orthodontia, and this meant that Sarah rode the train into New York once a week to spend the afternoon with him, and to have her braces adjusted. Emily was jealous, both of the orthodontia and the city visits, but Pookie explained that they couldn't afford treatment for both girls at once; her turn would come later, when she was older.

In the meantime Sarah's braces were terrible: they picked up unsightly white shreds of food, and someone at

school called her a walking hardware store. Who could imagine kissing a mouth like that? Who, for that matter, could bear to be close to her *body* for any length of time? Sarah washed her sweaters very carefully in an effort to keep the dyed color alive in their armpits, but it didn't work: a navy blue sweater would bleach to robin's-egg blue under the arms, and a red one to yellowish pink. Her strong sweat, no less than her braces, seemed a curse.

Another curse fell, for both girls, when Pookie announced that she'd found a wonderful house in a wonderful little town called Bradley, and that they'd be moving there in the fall. They had almost lost track of the number of times they'd moved.

'Well, it wasn't so bad, was it?' Pookie asked them after their first day of school in Bradley. 'Tell me about it.'

Emily had endured a day of silent hostility - one of the only two new girls in the whole sixth grade - and said she guessed it had been all right. But Sarah, a high-school freshman, was bubbling over with news of how fine it had been.

'They had a special assembly for all the new girls,' she said, 'and somebody played the piano and all the old girls stood up and sang this song. Listen:

How do you do, new girls, how do you do?  
Is there anything that we can do for you?  
We are glad that you are here  
For you always bring good cheer  
How do you do, new girls, how do you do?'

'Well!' Pookie said happily. 'Wasn't that nice.'

And Emily could only turn her face away in a spasm of disgust. It may have been 'nice,' but it was treacherous;

*she* knew the treachery implicit in a song like that.

The grade school and high school were in the same big building, which meant that Emily could catch occasional glimpses of her sister, if she was lucky, during the day; it also meant they could walk home together every afternoon. The arrangement was that they would meet in Emily's classroom after school.

But one Friday during football season Emily found herself waiting and waiting in the empty classroom, with no sign of Sarah, until her stomach began to knot with anxiety. When Sarah did arrive at last she looked funny - she had a funny smile - and behind her lumbered a frowning boy.

'Emmy, this is Harold Schneider,' she said.

'Hi.'

'Hi.' He was big and muscular and pimple-faced.

'We're going to the game over in Armonk,' Sarah explained. 'Just tell Pookie I'll be home for dinner, okay? You won't mind walking home by yourself, will you?'

The trouble was that Pookie had gone into New York that morning, after saying, at breakfast, 'Well, I *think* I'll get home before you do, but I'd better not promise.' That meant not only walking home alone but letting herself into the empty house alone to stare for hours at the naked furniture and the ticking clock, waiting. And if her mother ever did come home - 'Where's Sarah?' - how could she ever tell her that Sarah had gone off with a boy named Harold to a town called Armonk? It was out of the question.

'How're you gonna get there?' she inquired.

'In Harold's car. He's seventeen.'

'I don't think Pookie'd like that, Sarah. And I think you know she wouldn't like it. You better come on home with me.'