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McEWAN. The Strange Case of the Resurrected Penis in 'Solid Geometry'.

IT might seem odd to object to the lack of realist continuity in a short story where people are made to disappear according to a mathematical formula, but can anyone explain why Captain Nicholls' penis is on the narrator's table at the beginning of 'Solid Geometry'? I have read *First Love, Last Rites* many times, and taught it to first-year undergraduates for seven years, and not one of my students has even noticed, let alone been able to explain the anomaly. The narrator starts his account with the purchase of the penis at an auction in 1875: 'in a beautiful state of preservation'. He proudly, metonymically, boasts that that same penis is still with him: 'to the left sits Capt. Nicholls in the glass jar' (note the definitive article ('*the* glass jar'), implying a continuity of preservation). He is, here, calmly relating the history of past events which led him to make his wife 'disappear' by the magic of 'solid geometry', hence the cryptic foreshadowing: 'I used to think that at the end of it all I would try, if it was possible, to divorce my wife Maisie, but now there is no need at all'. But surely the preserved penis should not now be next to him. It has already (in the story he is about to tell) been ruined in the battle of the sexes. In that account Maisie has smashed the glass jar, in refutation of her husband's phallogentric, but sterile, obsessions, and the penis has been exposed as a newly grotesque object: 'My stomach heaved as the foreskin began to come away in my fingers'. The narrator has ceremoniously, symbolically, buried it – wrapped in newspaper – under the

geraniums in the garden. And then he has planned his premeditated geometrical revenge. So what are we to believe about the renaissance of the penis? Has he recovered it in its dishevelled state, dug it up, held it together, stuck the foreskin back in place, cleaned it up, bought another twelve-inch piece of laboratory glassware (which should not be *'the glass jar'*, but *'another'* or *'a new'* glass jar), and again preserved it (as a sign of his patriarchal victory, perhaps). If so, surely we are due some hint. Rather, this seems an odd moment of authorial forgetting. Has McEwan ever been asked about it? Are there other readings? What explains the mysterious reappearance of the preserved penis?

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