



The Perfect Place to Write

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By 2004, I HAD HAD SUCCESS with *Hannah and Hanna*, my first play, and some other verbatim work related to migration. I wanted to write something that related to my own life experience. I felt an imposter writing about an issue on which I had the detachment of a journalist. We lived in a small house in New Cross and our children were fifteen and seventeen. *What*, I asked myself, *do I have to say about my own world that might be interesting to other people?* The central element to the lives of our family, the one thing we all had in common, was sex. Our eldest wanted her boyfriend to stay the night at weekends. My wife was relaxed about this but I said to her, 'I can't bear to hear them having sex only one foot away from our bedroom!' Then she said that, actually, she couldn't bear to think of them hearing us having sex either. And if we let our daughter have her boyfriend for the night, how long before her younger brother wanted to bring his girlfriend home for the night? The tiny corridor of our upper floor could become a no-go area for squeamish parents. And where was I write this play? Downstairs? While all the action was going on upstairs? I needed to get away. A family home is not the quietest place to work, even in less explosive times. So I accepted an invitation to write in a retreat near Lille, Villa Mont Noir, the house of the late Marguerite Yourcenar. *This*, I thought, as I travelled to Lille on Eurostar, *will ensure that I don't drop this play for lack of time or place to write it. I will be away from home, with as much isolation as I could possibly want.* The French government is generous to writers and *Hannah and Hanna* had been performed and publicised in France; in exchange for some workshops on this play, I was given a large room in the house, and dinner was served



(after drinks) every night, in the library, for the two other writers on retreat, two elderly Parisians who didn't speak a word of English. So — no interruptions whatsoever and almost unlimited time. It didn't take long for the silence to become deafening. I was so used to the din of family life. I missed home badly. I dried up in no time. Sitting in the perfect place to write, with no diversion or duty of any kind, my concentration evaporated. One of the writers, in the room next to mine, was much older than me and he preferred a typewriter to a computer. He hammered away at this old machine at about ninety words a minute. All day long. He seemed to be unrelentingly fertile. Only as it grew dark in the evening, ragged with failure, would I go out and, in exasperation at myself, walk the flat and empty fields that stretch out beyond the gates of the villa. When I was sure that no one was about, I would talk to myself about the play as loudly and urgently as I could. I began to voice the characters. I had loud family rows with myself. The cows stared as I went past. The darker it got, the freer I felt and by November *Virgins* finally began to take shape. I finished a first draft.

Soon after I got home, I built a shed in the garden to write. It was closer to my family and much less comfortable — but certainly more inspiring.

Virgins played at the Edinburgh Festival in 2005 before going on a national tour. It proved especially popular in Sweden, where it played 200 times. There were also versions in French and German.