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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Love in the Afternoon**

## And Other Delights

Written by Penny Vincenzi

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Love in  
the  
Afternoon  
and other  
delights

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# *Love in the Afternoon*

All her friends thought it was wonderful that Anna visited her grandfather in the nursing home every other Sunday; Anna didn't think it was wonderful at all. She loved old people, always had done; she enjoyed chatting – or rather listening – to them, hearing their life stories, borne back through time, half, perhaps three quarters of a century. It was partly, she knew, because she loved stories, filing them away in her mind, occasionally noting down a few details in the leather-bound notebook her grandfather had given her for that very purpose.

Which was why she was here today. She had brought it in a few weeks ago, to show him how battered and well used it was, only to find that he had become ill, and was being admitted to hospital for tests. In the panic, she had left it behind.

He had never come back from the hospital. Anna's mother had collected all his things, but not the notebook.

'I don't know where it is, darling, I'm sorry. Maybe Matron will know.'

Matron did know. 'Your grandfather's girlfriend was entrusted with it,' she said. 'Mrs Lesley, you know?'

Anna did know. Rose Lesley was fairly new to the nursing home, a pretty, rather grand old lady, with snow-white hair and brilliant blue eyes. Her grandfather had been very taken with her.

'If you could bear to come in,' Matron said, 'I know Mrs Lesley would love to see you. She misses your grandfather dreadfully.'

Anna said she would, and the next Sunday afternoon she drove her mother's Mini over to Helena House.

Rose was in the garden, sitting under the big chestnut tree. ‘Your grandfather was so proud of you,’ she said, patting the seat beside her, ‘and so sure you’d achieve your ambition of becoming a writer. And having had a look at some of your ideas – I hope you don’t mind, my dear – I’m sure he was right.’

‘Well, I hope so,’ said Anna. ‘I haven’t even got to university yet. I’m still waiting for my A-level results.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ said Rose. ‘Writing stories is a gift, not something you learn. Do you think Shakespeare did his A levels, or Chaucer?’

Anna said she thought probably not.

‘I miss your grandfather,’ said Rose sadly. ‘Very much. He was such a gentleman; he had style. Not many of the people here have style.’

Anna had to admit this was true.

‘Style is terribly important,’ Rose said. ‘It tells you a lot about people. My mother had great style.’ After a pause she added, ‘Even after my father died and left us – her – penniless, she always looked wonderful.’

Anna sat silent, feeling a story coming her way.

‘Dudley, my first husband, was very stylish also,’ Rose said. ‘We were a most dashing couple. And of course the thirties were a very glamorous time. Goodness, we had fun. Oh, but you don’t want to hear about that . . .’

Anna said she did, as Rose had known she would, and for the rest of the afternoon they drifted into the magical world of Rose’s youth: of fine London houses and country weekends, of dazzling parties and smart nightclubs, of trips to Le Touquet in private planes . . . ‘And the women were so elegant – those bias-cut crêpe dresses and marcel-waved hair. And oh – the fur coats I had! Two or three, and the most wonderful collection of cigarette holders. One had real diamonds in it, from Asprey, a present from an admirer.’

‘He must have admired you very much,’ Anna said, ‘to give you that.’

‘Well, darling, of course he did. He became my lover. He gave me a pair of slave bangles too, gold set with emeralds, very beautiful. He was an Indian prince,’ she added, with a touch of complacency.

‘And did – did your husband know about this?’ asked Anna, given courage by Rose’s frankness.

‘Oh, I think so. We never discussed it – you didn’t then; there was none of this soul-baring. Marriage was a business and you ran it well, and if love faded a little, that didn’t mean life couldn’t be very pleasant. I ran my marriage extremely well,’ she added. ‘Dudley often said what a wonderful wife I was. And then the war came, and he went into the army, left me on the morning of the ninth of June 1940, sent to Italy, and I never saw him again.’

She lay back in the seat and closed her eyes. ‘Darling, I’m terribly tired. I can’t talk any more now. Will you come back? Another afternoon? My daughters come in the mornings – you wouldn’t want to waste time with them. My son is more interesting: he lives in California, works in the film industry.’

And so the afternoons of love, as Anna thought of them, began. She visited Rose every Sunday, and looked forward to it all week. It was like watching some wonderful film or TV series.

The war led to many love affairs: ‘Life was so tenuous, darling, you might never see someone again, so of course you wanted to be happy with them. And to help them forget what they were going back to. London was wonderful then, in spite of the danger. We used to go to the Dorchester in big parties, drink cocktails and eat wonderful dinners and then dance almost all night.’

‘What about air raids?’

‘Oh, we used to go down to the Turkish baths in the basement – perfectly safe – clutching our drinks; it was rather fun. You had to pay extra for your dinner, a few shillings, but then you could have anything you wanted: smoked salmon, asparagus . . .’ Her voice tailed off.

The great love of Rose's wartime years had been a 'wonderfully handsome' pilot who had covered himself in glory during the Battle of Britain and then been killed in an air raid on his first night of leave in London. 'I wanted to die too, it hurt so much – we were setting off on a little holiday the next day from my house in Chelsea; I waited for hours and hours, and he'd never been late, so I think I knew. Afterwards, I discovered he was going to propose – his best friend told me and said he'd shown him the ring.'

She had worked in a Red Cross canteen several nights a week, had a brief fling with a naval commander and another with a 'divine major' – and we think we have sexual freedom, thought Anna – but came to the end of the war 'a little tired and actually rather broke'.

'I thought then I'd had enough of love, that I wanted security and friendship. I was so lucky I met Richard. Richard was quite – quite plain, darling, a little sturdy, but so sweet and gentle and oh, he adored me. And he was pretty well off. We got married all at once and I made my vows that day knowing my romancing was over. Only it wasn't, of course.'

She had a talent for storytelling, knew exactly how to bring a time alive, when to end an episode. As the summer wore on, Anna finished her holiday job and started to visit Rose twice, three times a week.

'So sweet of you, darling, to listen to my nonsense,' Rose would say, and Anna would smile and say she never wanted it to end.

Rose was thirty-five when she married Richard. 'It was such a dreary time, just after the war; everything was still rationed and there was no fun, no sense of adventure to get you through it. We lived in Kent, in a rather nice house, and Richard went to the City every day. I was a little bored, but I was determined to be a good wife, and I looked after him very well. The girls were born, and Richard was so happy, a wonderful father. It was a magnificent era for the theatre – *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun* – and we'd

take a few friends, stay up in town, at the Savoy usually, but it wasn't nearly so romantic as in the war. And then – well, then I met the love of my life . . .’

Anna recognised the cue for the interval and left.

Next afternoon, when she arrived at Helena House, Rose had a bad cold. ‘So don't stay too long and make her tired,’ Matron said. Anna promised.

And then the most romantic chapter of Rose's life began.

‘I was a little bit down, getting bored with country life – I missed all my London friends terribly. And then – oh darling, then I met Jonathan. At a cocktail party. My knees went weak. He was absolutely the most beautiful man I had ever seen; he was an artist, and he wore the most marvellous clothes: jeans – which hardly anyone wore then – and white shirts, always white shirts, open at the neck, and beautiful velvet smoking jackets. But none of that mattered, you know; I should have loved him if he'd had one eye and been totally bald.’

Anna thought this probably unlikely, but she smiled at Rose and poured her another cup of tea.

‘He was quite shy, in spite of his looks; not a smooth operator at all. That was what I loved most. He had a slight stammer, too, and it just turned my heart over.’

‘Anyway, I tried to resist, both of us did, but it was absolutely overwhelming. I knew it was so bad of me, but Richard had no idea. I used to go up and see Jonathan twice a week in his studio. I lived for these afternoons, alone with him. His studio was in Chelsea, by the river Thames, and I can still see the reflection of the river on the ceiling. We would sit on the little balcony, drinking some rather beastly red wine, trying to decide what to do. It wasn't just an affair, you see – we wanted to be together for ever.’

‘When I was with him I wanted to stay, but the minute I left and was on the train again, going home, the torture began. I would think I couldn't leave Richard; he would be a completely



broken man. He was quite proud and stuffy, you see – how could he explain to the world that his wife had left him for an artist . . . ?’

Her voice had tailed off; she was asleep.

Two afternoons later, when Anna returned, Matron was in Rose’s room. She shook her head and said, very quietly, ‘Not today, Anna, she’s too tired.’

‘Nonsense,’ came the voice from the bed, ‘I’m not tired at all. And Anna and I have important things to talk about.’

Matron withdrew with a warning look at Anna.

‘Give me your hand, darling. I so love our afternoons. And I have so much to tell you today.’ But the hand was very warm and the cheeks were flushed. She talked faster than usual.

‘So, darling, there I was, trapped. It was love or duty, and I was never very good at duty. And I loved Jonathan so much. He was the first thing I thought of in the morning and the last thing at night; he made the sun shine for me, on the rainiest day. The prospect of life without him made everything bleak.

‘And then I realised I was pregnant. I knew it wasn’t Richard’s. And Jonathan said that now, of course, I couldn’t stay with Richard, I must go to him. I felt I was on the rack. I changed my mind hourly; it was absolutely dreadful. At one point I thought I should leave both of them, go away on my own. But then there would have been three of us unhappy. Oh dear . . .’ Two large tears rolled down her flushed face; she was reliving her unhappiness.

Anna stood up. ‘Dear Rose, you must stop now, you’re so tired. I’ll come back another day.’

She phoned next day. Matron said Rose was very unwell. ‘Bronchitis, possibly pneumonia.’

It became pneumonia.

Anna went to say goodbye to Rose. Her breathing was very fast, very shallow. She was wearing an oxygen mask which she kept pulling off, and was drifting in and out of consciousness. Anna bent and kissed her forehead and stood looking at her for a while,

remembering all the stories, all the lovers, wondering if Rose did too.

Rose died that night; Anna stood by the phone, crying at the news, and thought how much she would miss her and how she would never know whether she had indeed chosen love over duty.

She went to the funeral; there were only a few people there. A handful of Rose's friends, the staff of Helena House. Rose's children were in the front pew, two stout, plain women and a tall, grey-haired man with Rose's dazzling smile and brilliant blue eyes. Afterwards, at the nursing home, she introduced herself to them. 'Yes, our mother told us you were visiting her. Most kind,' said one of the women.

'Indeed,' said the other.

'Honestly, I enjoyed it,' said Anna.

'Such a good place, this,' said the first woman. 'Our father was here, you know. In fact, he had the same room.'

'No,' said Anna, 'no, I didn't know that. But I heard a lot about him,' she added, untruthfully. 'He was obviously a wonderful man.'

'He was indeed, wasn't he, girls?' said the man. 'A father in a million. So good to us all. And they were so devoted to one another, until the day he died.'

And in that moment, Anna knew what Rose had decided. She had chosen duty, but she had not entirely lost love. She had stayed with Richard, but she had had Jonathan's baby. A boy, who looked – most fortunately in the circumstances – just like his mother. But who spoke like his father. With a slight stammer.