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The Love Object

Collected Stories

Written by Edna O'Brien

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EDNA O'BRIEN

The Love Object

Collected Stories



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Dedication

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The Love Object

He simply said my name. He said ‘Martha,’ and once again I could feel it happening. My legs trembled under the big white cloth and my head became fuzzy, though I was not drunk. It’s how I fall in love. He sat opposite. The love object. Elderly. Blue eyes. Khaki hair. The hair was graying on the outside and he had spread the outer gray ribs across the width of his head as if to disguise the khaki, the way some men disguise a patch of baldness. He had what I call a very religious smile. An inner smile that came on and off, governed as it were by his private joy in what he heard or saw: a remark I made, the waiter removing the cold dinner plates that served as ornament and bringing warmed ones of a different design, the nylon curtain blowing inward and brushing my bare, summer-ripened arm. It was the end of a warm London summer.

‘I’m not mad about them, either,’ he said. We were engaged in a bit of backbiting. Discussing a famous couple we both knew. He kept his hands joined all the time as if they were being put to prayer. There were no barriers between us. We were strangers. I am a television announcer; we had met to do a job, and out of courtesy he asked me to dinner. He told me about his wife – who was thirty like me – and how he knew he would marry her the very first moment he set eyes on her. (She was his third wife.) I made no inquiries as to what she looked like. I still don’t know. The only memory I have of her is of her arms sheathed in big, mauve, crocheted sleeves; the image runs away with me and I see his pink, praying hands vanishing into those sleeves and the two of them waltzing in some large, grim room, smiling rapturously at their good fortune in being together. But that came much later.

We had a pleasant supper and figs for afters. The first figs I'd ever tasted. He tested them gently with his fingers, then put three on my side plate. I kept staring down at their purple-black skins, because with the shaking I could not trust myself to peel them. He took my mind off my nervousness by telling me a little story about a girl who was being interviewed on the radio and admitted to owning thirty-seven pairs of shoes and buying a new dress every Saturday, which she later endeavored to sell to friends or family. Somehow I knew that it was a story he had specially selected for me and also that he would not risk telling it to many people. He was in his way a serious man, and famous, though that is hardly of interest when one is telling about a love affair. Or is it? Anyhow, without peeling it, I bit into one of the figs.

How do you describe a taste? They were a new food and he was a new man and that night in my bed he was both stranger and lover, which I used to think was the ideal bed partner.

In the morning he was quite formal but unashamed; he even asked for a clothes brush because there was a smudge of powder on his jacket where we had embraced in the taxi coming home. At the time I had no idea whether or not we would sleep together, but on the whole I felt that we would not. I have never owned a clothes brush. I own books and records and various bottles of scent and beautiful clothes, but I never buy cleaning stuffs or aids for prolonging property. I expect it is improvident, but I just throw things away. Anyhow, he dabbed the powder smear with his handkerchief and it came off quite easily. The other thing he needed was a piece of sticking plaster because a new shoe had cut his heel. I looked but there was none left in the tin. My children had cleared it out during the long summer holidays. In fact, for a moment I saw my two sons throughout those summer days, slouched on chairs, reading comics, riding bicycles, wrestling, incurring cuts which they promptly covered with Elastoplast, and afterward, when the plasters fell, flaunting the brown-rimmed

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marks as proof of their valor. I missed them badly and longed to hold them in my arms – another reason why I welcomed his company. ‘There’s no plaster left,’ I said, not without shame. I thought how he would think me neglectful. I wondered if I ought to explain why my sons were at boarding school when they were still so young. They were eight and ten. But I didn’t. I had ceased to want to tell people the tale of how my marriage had ended and my husband, unable to care for two young boys, insisted on boarding school in order to give them, as he put it, a stabilizing influence. I believed it was done in order to deprive me of the pleasure of their company. I couldn’t.

We had breakfast outdoors. The start of another warm day. The dull haze that precedes heat hung from the sky, and in the garden next door the sprinklers were already on. My neighbors are fanatic gardeners. He ate three pieces of toast and some bacon. I ate also, just to put him at his ease, though normally I skip breakfast. ‘I’ll stock up with plaster, clothes brush, and cleaning fluids,’ I said. My way of saying, ‘You’ll come again?’ He saw through it straightaway. Hurrying down the mouthful of toast, he put one of his prayer hands over mine and told me solemnly and nicely that he would not have a mean and squalid little affair with me, but that we would meet in a month or so and he hoped we would become friends. I hadn’t thought of us as friends, but it was an interesting possibility. I remembered the earlier part of our evening’s conversation and his referring to his earlier wives and his older grown-up children, and I thought how honest and unnostalgic he was. I was really sick of sorrows and people multiplying them even to themselves. Another thing he did that endeared him was to fold back the green silk bedspread, a thing I never do myself.

When he left I felt quite buoyant and in a way relieved. It had been nice and there were no nasty aftereffects. My face was pink from kissing and my hair tossed from our exertions. I looked a

little wanton. Feeling tired from such a broken night's sleep, I drew the curtains and got back into bed. I had a nightmare. The usual one, where I am being put to death by a man. People tell me that a nightmare is healthy and from that experience I believe it. I wakened calmer than I had been for months and passed the remainder of the day happily.

Two mornings later he rang and asked was there a chance of our meeting that night. I said yes, because I was not doing anything and it seemed appropriate to have supper and seal our secret decently. But we started recharging.

'We did have a very good time,' he said. I could feel myself making little petrified moves denoting love, shyness; opening my eyes wide to look at him, exuding trust. This time he peeled the figs for both of us. We positioned our legs so that they touched and withdrew them shortly afterward, confident that our desires were flowing. He brought me home. I noticed when we were in bed that he had put cologne on his shoulder and that he must have set out to dinner with the hope if not the intention of sleeping with me. I liked the taste of his skin better than the foul chemical and I had to tell him so. He just laughed. Never had I been so at ease with a man. For the record, I had slept with four other men, but there always seemed to be a distance between us, conversation-wise. I mused for a moment on their various smells as I inhaled his, which reminded me of some herb. It was not parsley, not thyme, not mint, but some nonexistent herb compounded of these three smells. On this second occasion our lovemaking was more relaxed.

'What will you do if you make an avaricious woman out of me?' I asked.

'I will pass you on to someone very dear and suitable,' he said. We coiled together, and with my head on his shoulder I thought of pigeons under the railway bridge nearby, who passed their nights nestled together, heads folded into mauve breasts. In his

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sleep we kissed and murmured. I did not sleep. I never do when I am over-happy, overunhappy, or in bed with a strange man.

Neither of us said, 'Well, here we are, having a mean and squalid little affair.' We just started to meet. Regularly. We stopped going to restaurants because of his being famous. He would come to my house for dinner. I'll never forget the flurry of those preparations – putting flowers in vases, changing the sheets, thumping knots out of pillows, trying to cook, putting on makeup, and keeping a hairbrush nearby in case he arrived early. The agony of it! It was with difficulty that I answered the doorbell when it finally rang.

'You don't know what an oasis this is,' he would say. And then in the hallway he would put his hands on my shoulders and squeeze them through my thin dress and say, 'Let me look at you,' and I would hang my head, both because I was overwhelmed and because I wanted to be. We would kiss, often for a full five minutes. He kissed the inside of my nostrils. Then we would move to the sitting room and sit on the chaise longue still speechless. He would touch the bone of my knee and say what beautiful knees I had. He saw and admired parts of me that no other man had ever bothered with. Soon after supper we went to bed.

Once, he came unexpectedly in the late afternoon when I was dressed to go out. I was going to the theater with another man.

'How I wish I were taking you,' he said.

'We'll go to the theater one night?' He bowed his head. We would. It was the first time his eyes looked sad. We did not make love because I was made up and had my false eyelashes on and it seemed impractical. He said, 'Has any man ever told you that to see a woman you desire when you cannot do a thing about it leaves you with an ache?'

The ache conveyed itself to me and stayed all through the theater. I felt angry for not having gone to bed with him, and later I regretted it even more, because from that evening onward our

meetings were fewer. His wife, who had been in France with their children, returned. I knew this when he arrived one evening in a motorcar and in the course of conversation mentioned that his small daughter had that day peed over an important document. I can tell you now that he was a lawyer.

From then on it was seldom possible to meet at night. He made afternoon dates and at very short notice. Any night he did stay, he arrived with a travel bag containing toothbrush, clothes brush, and a few things a man might need for an overnight, loveless stay in a provincial hotel. I expect she packed it. I thought, How ridiculous. I felt no pity for her. In fact, the mention of her name – it was Helen – made me angry. He said it very harmlessly. He said they'd been burgled in the middle of the night and he'd gone down in his pajamas while his wife telephoned the police from the extension upstairs.

'They only burgle the rich,' I said hurriedly, to change the conversation. It was reassuring to find that he wore pajamas with her, when he didn't with me. My jealousy of her was extreme, and of course grossly unfair. Still, I would be giving the wrong impression if I said her existence blighted our relationship at that point. Because it didn't. He took great care to speak like a single man, and he allowed time after our lovemaking to stay for an hour or so and depart at his leisure. In fact, it is one of those after-love sessions that I consider the cream of our affair. We were sitting on the bed, naked, eating smoked-salmon sandwiches. I had lighted the gas fire because it was well into autumn and the afternoons got chilly. The fire made a steady, purring noise. It was the only light in the room. It was the first time he noticed the shape of my face, because he said that up to then my coloring had drawn all of his admiration. His face and the mahogany chest and the pictures also looked better. Not rosy, because the gas fire did not have that kind of glow, but resplendent with a whitish light. The goatskin rug underneath the window had a special luxurious softness. I

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remarked on it. He happened to say that he had a slight trace of masochism, and that often, unable to sleep at night in a bed, he would go to some other room and lie on the floor with a coat over him and fall fast asleep. A thing he'd done as a boy. The image of the little boy sleeping on the floor moved me to enormous compassion, and without a word from him, I led him across to the goatskin and laid him down. It was the only time our roles were reversed. He was not my father. I became his mother. Soft and totally fearless. Even my nipples, about which I am squeamish, did not shrink from his rabid demands. I wanted to do everything and anything for him. As often happens with lovers, my ardor and inventiveness stimulated his. We stopped at nothing. Afterward, remarking on our achievement – a thing he always did – he reckoned it was the most intimate of all our intimate moments. I was inclined to agree. As we stood up to get dressed, he wiped his armpits with the white blouse I had been wearing and asked which of my lovely dresses I would wear to dinner that night. He chose my black one for me. He said it gave him great pleasure to know that although I was to dine with others my mind would ruminate on what he and I had done. A wife, work, the world, might separate us, but in our thoughts we were betrothed.

'I'll think of you,' I said.

'And I, of you.'

We were not even sad at parting.

It was after that I had what I can only describe as a dream within a dream. I was coming out of sleep, forcing myself awake, wiping my saliva on the pillow slip, when something pulled me, an enormous weight dragged me down into the bed, and I thought: I have become infirm. I have lost the use of my limbs and this accounts for my listlessness for several months when I've wanted to do nothing except drink tea and stare out the window. I am a cripple. All over. Even my mouth won't move. Only my brain is ticking away. My brain tells me that a woman downstairs doing

the ironing is the only one who could locate me, but she might not come upstairs for days, she might think I'm in bed with a man, committing a sin. From time to time I sleep with a man, but normally I sleep alone. She'll leave the ironed clothes on the kitchen table, and the iron itself upright on the floor so that it won't set fire to anything. Blouses will be on hangers, their frilled collars white and fluid like foam. She's the sort of woman who even irons the toes and heels of nylon stockings. She'll slip away, until Thursday, her next day in. I feel something at my back or, strictly speaking, tugging at my bedcovers, which I have mounted right up the length of my back to cover my head. For shelter. And I know now that it's not infirmity that's dragging me down, but a man. How did he get in there? He's on the inside, near the wall. I know what he's going to do to me, and the woman downstairs won't ever come to rescue me, she'd be too ashamed or she might not think I want to be rescued. I don't know which of the men it is, whether it's the big tall bruiser that's at the door every time I open it innocently, expecting it's the laundry boy and find it's Him, with an old black carving knife, its edge glittering because he's just sharpened it on a step. Before I can scream, my tongue isn't mine anymore. Or it might be the Other One. Tall too, he gets me by my bracelet as I slip between the banisters of the stairs. I've forgotten that I am not a little girl anymore and that I don't slip easily between banisters. If the bracelet snapped in two I would have made my escape, leaving him with one half of a gold bracelet in his hand, but my goddamn provident mother had a safety chain put on it because it was nine-carat. Anyhow, he's in the bed. It will go on forever, the thing he wants. I daren't tum around to look at him. Then something gentle about the way the sheet is pulled down suggests that he might be the New One. The man I met a few weeks ago. Not my type at all, tiny broken veins on his cheeks, and red, actually red, hair. We were on a goatskin. But it was raised off the ground, high as a bed. I had been doing most of the

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loving; breasts, hands, mouth, all yearned to minister to him. I felt so sure, never have I felt so sure of the rightness of what I was doing. Then he started kissing me down there and I came to his lapping tongue and his head was under my buttocks and it was like I was bearing him, only there was pleasure instead of pain. He trusted me. We were two people, I mean, he wasn't someone on me, smothering me, doing something I couldn't see. I could see. I could have shat on his red hair if I wanted. He trusted me. He stretched the come to the very last. And all the things that I loved up to then, like glass or lies, mirrors and feathers, and pearl buttons, and silk, and willow trees, became secondary compared with what he'd done. He was lying so that I could see it: so delicate, so thin, with a bunch of worried blue veins along its sides. Talking to it was like talking to a little child. The light in the room was a white glow. He'd made me very soft and wet, so I put it in. It was quick and hard and forceful, and he said, 'I'm not considering you now, I think we've considered you,' and I said that was perfectly true and that I liked him roughing away. I said it. I was no longer a hypocrite, no longer a liar. Before that he had often remonstrated with me, he had said, "There are words we are not going to use to each other, words such as "Sorry" and "Are you angry?" I had used these words a lot. So I think from the gentle shuffle of the bedcovers – like a request really – that it might be him, and if it is I want to sink down and down into the warm, dark, sleepy pit of the bed and stay in it forever, coming with him. But I am afraid to look in case it is not Him but One of the Others.

When I finally woke up I was in a panic and I had a dreadful urge to telephone him, but though he never actually forbade it, I knew he would have been most displeased.

When something has been perfect, as our last encounter in the gaslight had been, there is a tendency to try hard to repeat it. Unfortunately, the next occasion was clouded. He came in the

afternoon and brought a suitcase containing all the paraphernalia for a dress dinner which he was attending that night. When he arrived he asked if he could hang up his tails, as otherwise they would be very creased. He hooked the hanger on the outer rim of the wardrobe, and I remember being impressed by the row of war medals along the top pocket. Our time in bed was pleasant but hasty. He worried about getting dressed. I just sat and watched him. I wanted to ask about his medals and how he had merited them, and if he remembered the war, and if he'd missed his then wife, and if he'd killed people, and if he still dreamed about it. But I asked nothing. I sat there as if I were paralyzed.

'No braces,' he said as he held the wide black trousers around his middle. His other trousers must have been supported by a belt.

'I'll go to Woolworth's for some,' I said. But that was impractical because he was already in danger of being late. I got a safety pin and fastened the trousers from the back. It was a difficult operation because the pin was not really sturdy enough.

'You'll bring it back?' I said. I am superstitious about giving people pins. He took some time to reply because he was muttering 'Damn' under his breath. Not to me. But to the stiff, inhuman, starched collar, which would not yield to the little gold studs he had wanted to pierce through. I tried. He tried. Each time when one of us failed the other became impatient. He said if we went on, the collar would be grubby from our hands. And that seemed a worse alternative. I thought he must be dining with very critical people, but of course I did not give my thoughts on the matter. In the end we each managed to get a stud through and he had a small sip of whiskey as a celebration. The bow tie was another ordeal. He couldn't do it. I daren't try.

'Haven't you done it before?' I said. I expect his wives – in succession – had done it for him. I felt such a fool. Then a lump of hatred. I thought how ugly and pink his legs were, how repellent the shape of his body, which did not have anything in the way of a

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waist, how deceitful his eyes, which congratulated himself in the mirror when he succeeded in making a clumsy bow. As he put on the coat the sound of the medals tinkling enabled me to remark on their music. There was so little I could say. Lastly he donned a white silk scarf that came below his middle. He looked like someone I did not know. He left hurriedly. I ran with him down the road to help get a taxi, and trying to keep up with him and chatter was not easy. All I can remember is the ghostly sight of the very white scarf swinging back and forth as we rushed. His shoes, which were patent, creaked unsuitably.

‘Is it all-male?’ I asked.

‘No. Mixed,’ he replied.

So that was why we hurried. To meet his wife at some appointed place. The hatred began to grow.

He did bring back the safety pin, but my superstition remained, because four straight pins with black rounded tops that had come off his new shirt were on my window ledge. He refused to take them. *He* was not superstitious.

Bad moments, like good ones, tend to be grouped together, and when I think of the dress occasion, I also think of the other time when we were not in utter harmony. It was on a street; we were searching for a restaurant. We had to leave my house because a friend had come to stay and we would have been obliged to tolerate her company. Going along the street – it was October and very windy – I felt that he was angry with me for having drawn us out into the cold where we could not embrace. My heels were very high and I was ashamed of the hollow sound they made. In a way I felt we were enemies. He looked in the windows of restaurants to see if any acquaintances of his were there. Two restaurants he decided against, for reasons best known to himself. One looked to be very attractive. It had orange bulbs inset in the walls and the light came through small squares of iron grating. We crossed the road to look at places on the opposite side. I saw a group of rowdies

coming toward us, and for something to say – what with my aggressive heels, the wind, traffic going by, the ugly unromantic street, we had run out of agreeable conversation – I asked if he ever felt apprehensive about encountering noisy groups like that, late at night. He said that in fact a few nights before he had been walking home very late and saw such a group coming toward him, and before he even registered fear, he found that he had splayed his bunch of keys between his fingers and had his hand, armed with the sharp points of the keys, ready to pull out of his pocket should they have threatened him. I suppose he did it again while we were walking along. Curiously enough, I did not feel he was my protector. I only felt that he and I were two people, that there was in the world trouble, violence, sickness, catastrophe, that he faced it in one way and that I faced it – or to be exact, that I shrank from it – in another. We would always be outside one another. In the course of that melancholy thought the group went by, and my conjecture about violence was all for nothing. We found a nice restaurant and drank a lot of wine.

Later our lovemaking, as usual, was perfect. He stayed all night. I used to feel specially privileged on the nights he stayed, and the only little thing that lessened my joy was spasms of anxiety in case he should have told his wife he was at such and such a hotel and her telephoning there and not finding him. More than once I raced into an imaginary narrative where she came and discovered us and I acted silent and ladylike and he told her very crisply to wait outside until he was ready. I felt no pity for her. Sometimes I wondered if we would ever meet or if in fact we had already met on an escalator at some point. Though that was unlikely, because we lived at opposite ends of London.

Then to my great surprise the opportunity came. I was invited to a Thanksgiving party given by an American magazine. He saw the card on my mantelpiece and said, 'You're going to that, too?' and I smiled and said maybe. Was he? 'Yes,' he said. He tried to

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make me reach a decision there and then but I was too canny. Of course I would go. I was curious to see his wife. I would meet him in public. It shocked me to think that we had never met in the company of any other person. It was like being shut off . . . a little animal locked away. I thought very distinctly of a ferret that a forester used to keep in a wooden box with a sliding top, when I was a child, and of another ferret being brought to mate with it once. The thought made me shiver. I mean, I got it confused; I thought of white ferrets with their little pink nostrils in the same breath as I thought of him sliding a door back and slipping into my box from time to time. His skin had a lot of pink in it.

‘I haven’t decided,’ I said, but when the day came I went. I took a lot of trouble with my appearance, had my hair set, and wore virginal attire. Black and white. The party was held in a large room with paneled walls of brown wood; blown-up magazine covers were along the panels. The bar was at one end, under a balcony. The effect was of shrunken barmen in white, lost underneath the cliff of the balcony, which seemed in danger of collapsing on them. A more unlikely room for a party I have never seen. There were women going around with trays, but I had to go to the bar because there was champagne on the trays and I have a preference for whiskey. A man I knew conducted me there, and en route another man placed a kiss on my back. I hoped that he witnessed this, but it was such a large room with hundreds of people around that I had no idea where he was. I noticed a dress I quite admired, a mauve dress with very wide crocheted sleeves. Looking up the length of the sleeves, I saw its owner’s eyes directed on me. Perhaps she was admiring my outfit. People with the same tastes often do. I have no idea what her face looked like, but later when I asked a girl friend which was his wife, she pointed to this woman with the crocheted sleeves. The second time I saw her in profile. I still don’t know what she looked like, nor do those eyes into which I looked speak to my memory with anything special, except, perhaps, slight covetousness.

Finally, I searched him out. I had a mutual friend walk across with me and apparently introduce me. He was unwelcoming. He looked strange, the flush on his cheekbones vivid and unnatural. He spoke to the mutual friend and virtually ignored me. Possibly to make amends he asked, at length, if I was enjoying myself.

'It's a chilly room,' I said. I was referring of course to his manner. Had I wanted to describe the room I would have used 'grim,' or some such adjective.

'I don't know about you being chilly but I'm certainly not,' he said with aggression. Then a very drunk woman in a sack dress came and took his hand and began to slobber over him. I excused myself and went off. He said most pointedly that he hoped he would see me again some time.

I caught his eye just as I left the party, and I felt both sorry for him and angry with him. He looked stunned, as if important news had just been delivered to him. He saw me leave with a group of people and I stared at him without the whimper of a smile. Yes, I was sorry for him. I was also piqued. The very next day when we met and I brought it up, he did not even remember that a mutual friend had introduced us.

'Clement Hastings!' he said, repeating the man's name. Which goes to show how nervous he must have been.

It is impossible to insist that bad news delivered in a certain manner and at a certain time will have a less awful effect. But I feel that I got my walking papers from him at the wrong moment. For one thing, it was morning. The clock went off and I sat up wondering when he had set it. Being on the outside of the bed, he was already attending to the push button.

'I'm sorry, darling,' he said.

'Did you set it?' I said, indignant. There was an element of betrayal here, as if he'd wanted to sneak away without saying goodbye.

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‘I must have,’ he said. He put his arm around me and we lay back again. It was dark outside and there was a feeling – though this may be memory feeling – of frost.

‘Congratulations, you’re getting your prize today,’ he whispered. I was being given an award for my announcing.

‘Thank you,’ I said. I was ashamed of it. It reminded me of being back at school and always coming first in everything and being guilty about this but not disciplined enough to deliberately hold back.

‘It’s beautiful that you stayed all night,’ I said. I was stroking him all over. My hands were never still in bed. Awake or asleep, I constantly caressed him. Not to excite him, simply to reassure and comfort him and perhaps to consolidate my ownership. There is something about holding on to things that I find therapeutic. For hours I hold smooth stones in the palm of my hand or I grip the sides of an armchair and feel the better for it. He kissed me. He said he had never known anyone so sweet or so attentive. Encouraged, I began to do something very intimate. I heard his sighs of pleasure, the ‘oy, oy’ of delight when he was both indulging it and telling himself that he mustn’t. At first I was unaware of his speaking voice.

‘Hey,’ he said jocularly, just like that. ‘This can’t go on, you know.’ I thought he was referring to our activity at that moment, because of course it was late and he would have to get up shortly. Then I raised my head from its sunken position between his legs and I looked at him through my hair, which had fallen over my face. I saw that he was serious.

‘It just occurred to me that possibly you love me,’ he said. I nodded and pushed my hair back so that he would read it, my testimony, clear and clean upon my face. He put me lying down so that our heads were side by side and he began:

‘I adore you, but I’m not in love with you; with my commitments I don’t think I could be in love with anyone, it all started

gay and lighthearted . . .’ Those last few words offended me. It was not how I saw it or how I remembered it: the numerous telegrams he sent me saying, ‘I long to see you,’ or ‘May the sun shine on you,’ the first few moments each time when we met and were overcome with passion, shyness, and the shock of being so disturbed by each other’s presence. We had even searched in our dictionaries for words to convey the specialness of our regard for each other. He came up with ‘cense,’ which meant to adore or cover with the perfume of love. It was a most appropriate word, and we used it over and over again. Now he was negating all this. He was talking about weaving me into his life, his family life . . . becoming a friend. He said it, though, without conviction. I could not think of a single thing to say. I knew that if I spoke I would be pathetic, so I remained silent. When he’d finished I stared straight ahead at the split between the curtains, and looking at the beam of raw light coming through, I said, ‘I think there’s frost outside,’ and he said that possibly there was, because winter was upon us. We got up, and as usual he took the bulb out of the bedside lamp and plugged in his razor. I went off to get breakfast. That was the only morning I forgot about squeezing orange juice for him and I often wonder if he took it as an insult. He left just before nine.

The sitting room held the traces of his visit. Or, to be precise, the remains of his cigars. In one of the blue, saucer-shaped ashtrays there were thick turds of dark-gray cigar ash. There were also stubs, but it was the ash I kept looking at, thinking that its thickness resembled the thickness of his unlovely legs. And once again I experienced hatred for him. I was about to tip the contents of the ashtray into the fire grate when something stopped me, and what did I do but get an empty lozenge box and with the aid of a sheet of paper lift the clumps of ash in there and carry the tin upstairs. With the movement the turds lost their shape, and whereas they had reminded me of his legs, they were now an even mass of

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dark-gray ash, probably like the ashes of the dead. I put the tin in a drawer underneath some clothes.

Later in the day I was given my award – a very big silver medalion with my name on it. At the party afterward I got drunk. My friends tell me that I did not actually disgrace myself, but I have a humiliating recollection of beginning a story and not being able to go ahead with it, not because the contents eluded me, but because the words became too difficult to pronounce. A man brought me home, and after I'd made him a cup of tea, I said good night overproperly; then when he was gone I staggered to my bed. When I drink heavily I sleep badly. It was still dark outside when I woke up and straightaway I remembered the previous morning and the suggestion of frost outside, and his cold warning words. I had to agree. Although our meetings were perfect, I had a sense of doom impending, of a chasm opening up between us, of someone telling his wife, of souring love, of destruction. And still we hadn't gone as far as we should have gone. There were peaks of joy and of its opposite that we should have climbed to, but the time was not left to us. He had of course said, 'You still have a great physical hold over me,' and that in its way I found degrading. To have gone on making love when he had discarded me would have been repellent. It had come to an end. The thing I kept thinking of was a violet in a wood and how a time comes for it to drop off and die. The frost may have had something to do with my thinking, or rather, with my musing. I got up and put on a dressing gown. My head hurt from the hangover, but I knew that I must write to him while I had some resolution. I know my own failings, and I knew that before the day was out I would want to see him again, sit with him, coax him back with sweetness and my overwhelming helplessness.

I wrote the note and left out the bit about the violet. It is not a thing you can put down on paper without seeming fanciful. I said if he didn't think it prudent to see me, then not to see me. I said it

had been a nice interlude and that we must entertain good memories of it. It was a remarkably controlled letter. He wrote back promptly. My decision came as a shock, he said. Still, he admitted that I was right. In the middle of the letter he said he must penetrate my composure and to do so he must admit that above and beyond everything he loved me and would always do so. That of course was the word I had been snooping around for, for months. It set me off. I wrote a long letter back to him. I lost my head. I oversaid everything. I testified to loving him, to sitting on the edge of madness in the intervening days, to my hoping for a miracle.

It is just as well that I did not write out the miracle in detail, because possibly it is, or was, rather inhuman. It concerned his family.

He was returning from the funeral of his wife and children, wearing black tails. He also wore the white silk scarf I had seen him with, and there was a black mourning tulip in his buttonhole. When he came toward me I snatched the black tulip and replaced it with a white narcissus, and he in turn put the scarf around my neck and drew me toward him by holding its fringed ends. I kept moving my neck back and forth within the embrace of the scarf. Then we danced divinely on a wooden floor that was white and slippery. At times I thought we would fall, but he said, 'You don't have to worry, I'm with you.' The dance floor was also a road and we were going somewhere beautiful.

For weeks I waited for a reply to my letter, but there was none. More than once I had my hand on the telephone, but something cautionary – a new sensation for me – in the back of my mind bade me to wait. To give him time. To let regret take charge of his heart. To let him come of his own accord. And then I panicked. I thought that perhaps the letter had gone astray or had fallen into other hands. I'd posted it, of course, to the office in Lincoln's Inn where he worked. I wrote another. This time it was a formal note, and with it I enclosed a postcard with the words YES and NO. I

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asked if he had received my previous letter to kindly let me know by simply crossing out the word which did not apply on my card, and send it back to me. It came back with the *no* crossed out. Nothing else. So he had received my letter. I think I looked at the card for hours. I could not stop shaking, and to calm myself I took several drinks. There was something so brutal about the card, but then you could say that I had asked for it by approaching the situation in that way. I took out the box with his ash in it and wept over it, and wanted both to toss it out of the window and to preserve it forevermore.

In general I behaved very strangely. I rang someone who knew him and asked for no reason at all what she thought his hobbies might be. She said he played the harmonium, which I found unbearable news altogether. Then I entered a black patch, and on the third day I lost control.

Well, from not sleeping and taking pep pills and whiskey, I got very odd. I was shaking all over and breathing very quickly, the way one might after witnessing an accident. I stood at my bedroom window, which is on the second floor, and looked at the concrete underneath. The only flowers left in bloom were the hydrangeas, and they had faded to a soft russet, which was much more fetching than the harsh pink they were all summer. In the garden next door there were frost hats over the fuchsias. Looking first at the hydrangeas, then at the fuchsias, I tried to estimate the consequences of my jumping. I wondered if the drop were great enough. Being physically awkward I could only conceive of injuring myself fatally, which would be worse, because I would then be confined to my bed and imprisoned with the very thoughts that were driving me to desperation. I opened the window and leaned out, but quickly drew back. I had a better idea. There was a plumber downstairs installing central heating – an enterprise I had embarked upon when my lover began to come regularly and we liked walking around naked eating sandwiches and playing

records. I decided to gas myself and to seek the help of the plumber in order to do it efficiently. I am aware – someone must have told me – that there comes a point in the middle of the operation when the doer regrets it and tries to withdraw but cannot. That seemed like an extra note of tragedy that I had no wish to experience. So I decided to go downstairs to this man and explain to him that I *wanted* to die, and that. I was not telling him simply for him to prevent me, or console me, that I was not looking for pity – there comes a time when pity is of no help – and that I simply wanted his assistance. He could show me what to do, settle me down, and – this is absurd – be around to take care of the telephone and the doorbell for the next few hours. Also to dispose of me with dignity. Above all, I wanted that. I even decided what I would wear: a long dress, which in fact was the same color as the hydrangeas in their russet phase and which I've never worn except for a photograph or on television. Before going downstairs, I wrote a note which said simply: 'I am committing suicide through lack of intelligence, and through not knowing, not learning to know, how to live.'

You will think I am callous not to have taken the existence of my children into account. But, in fact, I did. Long before the affair began, I had reached the conclusion that they had been parted from me irrevocably by being sent to boarding school. If you like, I felt I had let them down years before. I thought – it was an unhysterical admission – that my being alive or my being dead made little difference to the course of their lives. I ought to say that I had not seen them for a month, and it is a shocking fact that although absence does not make love less, it cools down our physical need for the ones we love. They were due home for their mid-term holiday that very day, but since it was their father's turn to have them, I knew that I would only see them for a few hours one afternoon. And in my despondent state that seemed worse than not seeing them at all.

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Well, of course, when I went downstairs the plumber took one look at me and said, 'You could do with a cup of tea.' He actually had tea made. So I took it and stood there warming my child-sized hands around the barrel of the brown mug. Suddenly, swiftly, I remembered my lover measuring our hands when we were lying in bed and saying that mine were no bigger than his daughter's. And then I had another and less edifying memory about hands. It was the time we met when he was visibly distressed because he'd caught those same daughter's hands in a motorcar door. The fingers had not been broken but were badly bruised, and he felt awful about it and hoped his daughter would forgive him. Upon being told the story, I bolted off into an anecdote about almost losing *my* fingers in the door of someone's Jaguar. It was pointless, although a listener might infer from it that I was a boastful and heartless girl. I would have been sorry for any child whose fingers were caught in a motorcar door, but at that moment I was trying to recall him to the hidden world of him and me. Perhaps it was one of the things that made him like me less. Perhaps it was then he resolved to end the affair. I was about to say this to the plumber, to warn him about so-called love often hardening the heart, but like the violets, it is something that can miss awfully, and when it does two people are mortally embarrassed. He'd put sugar in my tea and I found it sickly.

'I want you to help me,' I said.

'Anything,' he said. I ought to know that. We were friends. He would do the pipes tastefully. The pipes would be little works of art and the radiators painted to match the walls.

'You may think I will paint these white, but in fact they will be light ivory,' he said. The whitewash on the kitchen walls had yellowed a bit.

'I want to do myself in,' I said hurriedly.

'Good God,' he said, and then burst out laughing. He always knew I was dramatic. Then he looked at me, and obviously my

face was a revelation. For one thing I could not control my breathing. He put his arm around me and led me into the sitting room and we had a drink. I knew he liked drink and thought, It's an ill wind that doesn't blow some good. The maddening thing was that I kept thinking a live person's thoughts. He said I had so much to live for. 'A young girl like you – people wanting your autograph, a lovely new car,' he said.

'It's all . . .' I groped for the word. I had meant to say 'meaningless,' but 'cruel' was the word that came out.

'And your boys,' he said. 'What about your boys?' He had seen photographs of them, and once I'd read him a letter from one of them. The word 'cruel' seemed to be blazing in my head. It screamed at me from every corner of the room. To avoid his glance, I looked down at the sleeve of my angora jersey and methodically began picking off pieces of fluff and rolling them into a little ball.

There was a moment's pause.

'This is an unlucky road. You're the third,' he said.

'The third what?' I said, industriously piling the black fluff into my palm.

'A woman farther up; her husband was a bandleader, used to be out late. One night she went to the dance hall and saw him with another girl; she came home and did it straightaway.'

'Gas?' I asked, genuinely curious.

'No, sedation,' he said, and was off on another story about a girl who'd gassed herself and was found by him because he was in the house treating dry rot at the time. 'Naked, except for a jersey,' he said, and speculated on why she should be attired like that. His manner changed considerably as he recalled how he went into the house, smelled gas, and searched it out.

I looked at him. His face was grave. He had scaled eyelids. I had never looked at him so closely before. 'Poor Michael,' I said. A feeble apology. I was thinking that if he had abetted my suicide he would then have been committed to the memory of it.

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‘A lovely young girl,’ he said, wistful.

‘Poor girl,’ I said, mustering up pity.

There seemed to be nothing else to say. He had shamed me out of it. I stood up and made an effort at normality – I took some glasses off a side table and moved in the direction of the kitchen. If dirty glasses are any proof of drinking, then quite a lot of it had been done by me over the past few days.

‘Well,’ he said, and rose and sighed. He admitted to feeling pleased with himself.

As it happened, there would have been a secondary crisis that day. Although my children were due to return to their father, he rang to say that the older boy had a temperature, and since – though he did not say this – he could not take care of a sick child, he would be obliged to bring them to my house. They arrived in the afternoon. I was waiting inside the door, with my face heavily made up to disguise my distress. The sick boy had a blanket draped over his tweed coat and one of his father’s scarves around his face. When I embraced him, he began to cry. The younger boy went around the house to make sure that everything was as he had last seen it. Normally I had presents for them on their return home, but I had neglected it on this occasion, and consequently they were a little downcast.

‘Tomorrow,’ I said.

‘Why are there tears in your eyes?’ the sick boy asked as I undressed him.

‘Because you are sick,’ I said, telling a half-truth.

‘Oh, Mamsies,’ he said, calling me by a name he had used for years. He put his arms around me and we both began to cry. I felt he was crying for the numerous unguessed afflictions that the circumstances of a broken home would impose upon him. It was strange and unsatisfying to hold him in my arms, when over the months I had got used to my lover’s size – the width of his shoulders, the exact height of his body, which obliged me to stand

on tiptoe so that our limbs could correspond perfectly. Holding my son, I was conscious only of how small he was and how tenaciously he clung.

The younger boy and I sat in the bedroom and played a game which entailed reading out questions such as 'A river?' 'A famous footballer?' and then spinning a disk until it steadied down at one letter and using that letter as the first initial of the river or the famous footballer or whatever the question called for. I was quite slow at it, and so was the sick boy. His brother won easily, although I had asked him to let the invalid win. Children are callous.

We all jumped when the heating came on, because the boiler, from the basement just underneath, gave an almighty churning noise and made the kind of sudden erupting move I had wanted to make that morning when I stood at the bedroom window and tried to pitch myself out. As a special surprise and to cheer me up, the plumber had called in two of his mates, and among them they got the job finished. To make us warm and happy, as he put it when he came to the bedroom to tell me. It was an awkward moment. I'd avoided him since our morning's drama. At teatime I'd even left his tea on a tray out on the landing. Would he tell other people how I had asked him to be my murderer? Would he have recognized it as that? I gave him and his friends a drink, and they stood uncomfortably in the children's bedroom and looked at the little boy's flushed face and said he would soon be better. What else could they say!

For the remainder of the evening, the boys and I played the quiz game over and over again, and just before they went to sleep I read them an adventure story. In the morning they both had temperatures. I was busy nursing them for the next couple of weeks. I made beef tea a lot and broke bread into it and coaxed them to swallow those sops of savory bread. They were constantly asking to be entertained. The only thing I could think of in the

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way of facts were particles of nature lore I had gleaned from one of my colleagues in the television canteen. Even with embellishing, it took not more than two minutes to tell my children: of a storm of butterflies in Venezuela, of animals called sloths that are so lazy they hang from trees and become covered with moss, and of how the sparrows in England sing different from the sparrows in Paris.

'More,' they would say. 'More, more.' Then we would have to play that silly game again or embark upon another adventure story.

At these times I did not allow my mind to wander, but in the evenings, when their father came, I used to withdraw to the sitting room and have a drink. Well, that was disastrous. The leisure enabled me to brood; also, I have very weak bulbs in the lamps and the dimness gives the room a quality that induces reminiscence. I would be transported back. I enacted various kinds of reunion with my lover, but my favorite one was an unexpected meeting in one of those tiled, inhuman, pedestrian subways and running toward each other and finding ourselves at a stairway which said (one in London actually does say), TO CENTRAL ISLAND ONLY, and laughing as we leaped up those stairs propelled by miraculous wings. In less indulgent phases, I regretted that we hadn't seen more sunsets, or cigarette advertisements, or something, because in memory our numerous meetings became one long uninterrupted state of lovemaking without the ordinariness of things in between to fasten those peaks. The days, the nights with him, seemed to have been sandwiched into a long, beautiful, but single night, instead of being stretched to the seventeen occasions it actually was. Ah, vanished peaks. Once I was so sure that he had come into the room that I tore off a segment of an orange I had just peeled, and handed it to him.

But from the other room I heard the low, assured voice of the children's father delivering information with the self-importance of a man delivering dogmas, and I shuddered at the degree of

poison that lay between us when we'd once professed to love. Plagued love. Then, some of the feeling I had for my husband transferred itself to my loyer, and I reasoned with myself that the letter in which he had professed to love me was sham, that he had merely written it when he thought he was free of me, but finding himself saddled once again, he withdrew and let me have the post-card. I was a stranger to myself. Hate was welling up. I wished multitudes of humiliation on him. I even plotted a dinner party that I would attend, having made sure that he was invited, and snubbing him throughout. My thoughts teetered between hate and the hope of something final between us, so that I would be certain of his feelings toward me. Even as I sat in a bus, an advertisement which caught my eye was immediately related to him. It said, DON'T PANIC, WE MEND, WE ADAPT, WE REMODEL. It was an advertisement for pearl stringing. I would mend and with vengeance.

I cannot say when it first began to happen, because that would be too drastic, and anyhow, I do not know. But the children were back at school, and we'd got over Christmas, and he and I had not exchanged cards. But I began to think less harshly of him. They were silly thoughts, really. I hoped he was having little pleasures like eating in restaurants, and clean socks, and red wine the temperature he liked it, and even – yes, even ecstasies in bed with his wife. These thoughts made me smile to myself inwardly, the new kind of smile I had discovered. I shuddered at the risk he'd run by seeing me at all. Of course, the earlier injured thoughts battled with these new ones. It was like carrying a taper along a corridor where the drafts are fierce and the chances of it staying alight pretty meager. I thought of him and my children in the same instant, their little foibles became his: my children telling me elaborate lies about, their sporting feats, his slight puffing when we climbed steps and his trying to conceal it. The age difference between us must have saddened him. It was then I think that I

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really fell in love with him. His courtship of me, his telegrams, his eventual departure, even our lovemaking were nothing compared with this new sensation. It rose like sap within me, it often made me cry, the fact that he could not benefit from it! The temptation to ring him had passed away.

His phone call came quite out of the blue. It was one of those times when I debated about answering it or not, because mostly I let it ring. He asked if we could meet, if, and he said this so gently, my nerves were steady enough. I said my nerves were never better. That was a liberty I had to take. We met in a café for tea. Toast again. Just like the beginning. He asked how I was. Remarked on my good complexion. Neither of us mentioned the incident of the postcard. Nor did he say what impulse had moved him to telephone. It may not have been impulse at all. He talked about his work and how busy he'd been, and then relayed a little story about taking an elderly aunt for a drive and driving so slowly that she asked him to please hurry up because she would have walked there quicker.

'You've recovered,' he said then, suddenly. I looked at his face. I could see it was on his mind.

'I'm over it,' I said, and dipped my finger into the sugar bowl and let him lick the white crystals off the tip of my finger. Poor man. I could not have told him anything else, he would not have understood. In a way it was like being with someone else. He was not the one who had folded back the bedspread and sucked me dry and left his cigar ash for preserving. He was the representative of that one.

'We'll meet from time to time,' he said.

'Of course.' I must have looked dubious.

'Perhaps you don't want to?'

'Whenever you feel you would like to.' I neither welcomed nor dreaded the thought. It would not make any difference to how I felt. That was the first time it occurred to me that all my life I had

feared imprisonment, the nun's cell, the hospital bed, the places where one faced the self without distraction, without the crutches of other people – but sitting there feeding him white sugar, I thought, I now have entered a cell, and this man cannot know what it is for me to love him the way I do, and I cannot weigh him down with it, because he is in another cell confronted with other difficulties.

The cell reminded me of a convent, and for something to say, I mentioned my sister the nun.

'I went to see my sister.'

'How is she?' he asked. He had often inquired about her. He used to take an interest in her and ask what she looked like. I even got the impression that he had a fantasy about seducing her.

'She's fine,' I said. 'We were walking down a corridor and she asked me to look around and make sure that there weren't any other sisters looking, and then she hoisted her skirts up and slid down the banister.'

'Dear girl,' he said. He liked that story. The smallest things gave him such pleasure.

I enjoyed our tea. It was one of the least fruitless afternoons I'd had in months, and coming out he gripped my arm and said how perfect it would be if we could get away for a few days. Perhaps he meant it.

In fact, we kept our promise. We do meet from time to time. You could say things are back to normal again. By normal I mean a state whereby I notice the moon, trees, fresh spit upon the pavement; I look at strangers and see in their expressions something of my own predicament; I am part of everyday life, I suppose. There is a lamp in my bedroom that gives out a dry crackle each time an electric train goes by, and at night I count those crackles because it is the time he comes back. I mean the real he, not the man who confronts me from time to time across a café table, but the man that dwells somewhere within me. He rises before my eyes – his

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praying hands, his tongue that liked to suck, his sly eyes, his smile, the veins on his cheeks, the calm voice speaking sense to me. I suppose you wonder why I torment myself like this with details of his presence, but I need it, I cannot let go of him now, because if I did, all our happiness and my subsequent pain – I cannot vouch for his – will all have been nothing, and nothing is a dreadful thing to hold on to.