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Opening Extract from...

If You Go Away

Written by Adele Parks

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IF YOU
GO AWAY

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MARCH 1914

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27th March 1914

Dearest Diary, I have waited for such a long time for today. Eighteen years, nine months and ten days. My entire life. Forever.

VIVIAN CAREFULLY UNDERLINED the word *forever* and in a somewhat uncharacteristic gesture hugged the diary to her as though it was a child. Vivian Foster wasn't prone to being especially giddy – amongst her friends she was considered the most knowing and realistic – but today was, without doubt, exceptional.

Forever? There must have been a time when she wasn't aware of how important marrying was, when she was just a child and concerned with paddling in streams, making perfume from crushed rose petals or picking brambles. Then all she'd waited for was the next sunny day. She just couldn't remember that time. Perhaps she'd written what she had because writing in diaries made her nervous. Stomach fluttery. She was not sure she wanted to be so known, and certainly not by her already far too controlling mother, nosy younger siblings or a cheeky maid, which was the risk. Diaries were dishonest. When she wrote in hers, she fell into a persona that was quite close to her best self but far from her true self, an insurance against prying eyes. She kept her true self buried practically all of the time. Eighteen-year-old girls weren't exactly

encouraged to say what they thought; in fact they weren't encouraged to think at all. Writing that she had waited 'forever' for this day was the sort of thing that could not cause any real trouble; it was the type of comment that people expected young, virginal debutantes to write. Naïve. Forgivably imprecise.

Almost the entire Foster family understood the importance of today. Vivian's two younger sisters Susan and Barbara (the latter known to all as Babe, as Mrs Foster's way of signalling to Mr Foster that there would be no more babies) were obligingly awestruck. They sat on Vivian's bed, mouths slightly ajar, eyes glazed with excitement, as she wafted around her room, opening the wardrobe door, fingering the tin of talcum powder, playing with the ribbons on her dresses, until she sent them back to the nursery with an imperious wave of the arm. Of course they were impressed. Vivian was older than them (by two and six years respectively) and had been attending balls whilst they were tucked up in bed, a fact that was too compelling for them to ever consider contradicting her. Her brother Toby, four years her junior, was nonplussed. His gender gave him a strong sense of superiority that, somewhat annoyingly, overrode the age discrepancy.

It was absolutely true to say that since coming out eight months ago, Vivian had been waiting for this exact day, and there wasn't a huge difference in her imagination between eight months and forever, because before she came out, she was more or less nothing.

She was simply waiting.

A schoolgirl who could be bossed and directed by almost anyone: parents, close and distant relatives, Nanny, the governess, neighbours, the vicar and anyone Mrs Foster had ever been intimate with, who still might be found in the drawing room on Thursday 'at homes'. Providing a person was old and wealthy enough to have opinions, it was accepted that they could foist them upon young girls, who had to receive them (however ridiculous) in silence. That

was why Vivian believed today to be so important. Everything changed.

Sometimes it had seemed as though this day would never come around; irrationally she'd feared that longing for it so ardently might lead to a catastrophic, logic-defying interruption to the passage of time, but time had ultimately surrendered and the day had arrived.

Nathaniel Thorpe.

The big, athletic sort, over six feet tall, straight white teeth, blond hair, lashes a woman might envy and a chin a man might lose an eye on. He was always ruddy and muddy from the games he played: football and rugby, cricket in the summer. He was forever shooting or hunting or riding. The things people said of him: vigorous. Handsome. Dashing. Eminently marriageable. Evidently desirable. He left her feeling tremulous.

She'd known of him for years, although they'd only been able to speak once she came out. He was her aunt's neighbour and the sole reason a month in the country every summer, since she was thirteen years old, had been bearable. His family owned hundreds and hundreds of acres of land, perhaps thousands, all around her aunt's village, as far as the eye could see. She'd often watched from the upstairs windows, longing for that rare occasion when he was home from Eton and she might catch him, his cousins and friends discharging their guns and making their horses sweat as they galloped across the adjacent fields chasing something or other: a fox, a hare, good times. She had wondered how rich he was exactly. There seemed to be no limit as to what he could afford. It was hard to imagine. He'd finished at Oxford. Or maybe it had finished with him; it wasn't clear if he'd been sent down or had even gone up. Even though they were friendly now, it was not the sort of thing she could ask. She didn't want to bother or nag. Her mother no doubt had made enquiries. Discreetly. She'd have wanted to know if there were debts or prospects, scandals

or intentions. She couldn't have heard anything too awful or off-putting, as Vivian had been allowed to pursue him. Gently, appropriately, unobtrusively. There was a way to do these things.

She knew that.

Well before her own coming-out ball she'd been instructed as to what she needed to do to draw his attention. She was lucky enough to have been born with what everyone agreed to be the sort of face that – more often than not – pleased. It was the first and last thing people thought about her. She was lovely to look at. They never wondered whether she was kind or reliable, able or resourceful. She wasn't encouraged to give these attributes too much consideration either.

Mrs Foster often began her days with a quiet feeling of superiority. It was hard not to. Her daughter had been such a success this season. As a child her relentless energy and impulsiveness had, frankly, been rather exhausting, but it was a skill that transferred quite nicely now they were husband hunting. Vivian was obsessively attentive to her grooming. Her hems did not dare to hang; the maids in the powder rooms at dances never had to come to her rescue with a quick stitch – she was far too in control to need that sort of service. Other girls were so sluggish and neglectful by comparison. Vivian's younger sisters would linger in bed far later than was polite if permitted. Susan in particular had a slow sort of nature. Her voluptuous figure was testament to that; she was entirely lacking in will power. So many girls, restricted by corsets and convention, only ever moved languidly, as though they were wading through wet sand. Vivian was altogether different, luckily. She was sprightly. Energetic. Every bit of her had a use; there was nothing unnecessary or wasteful.

Of course, as a mother, Mrs Foster had a duty to control and direct that energy, subdue her impulsiveness. It was a good thing her daughter was noticed, but she didn't want her to be set apart. That would be a catastrophe. Vivian was trained and instructed

on the importance of utilising her looks, charm and energy to the full but never hinting at wilfulness or independence. She must delight absolutely everyone. She had listened and soon the mothers trusted her, the fathers were charmed by her, the other girls adored her and the men insisted they would fight duels for her, if such a thing still went on. The opinion was that despite her waning family fortune, Vivian Foster was a success. Behind their fans the more honest chaperones often commented that she put other young ladies in the shade. She had something rare.

Mrs Foster's feeling of superiority would have been entirely obliterated if she'd known that occasionally Vivian stood naked in front of the mirror admiring her lean long legs, her tiny waist, her small but pert breasts, whilst thinking it such a pity that no one else ever got to see any of it. She was used to accepting compliments about her face, hair and eyes; she could only imagine the sort of things *he* might say about the rest of her body. And imagine it she did as she gently trailed her fingers down her body. Luckily Mrs Foster's peace of mind was never disturbed, because her involvement with her daughter was formal, superficial, while Vivian, for her part, understood the value of secrecy. She never undressed without wedging a chair under the handle of her bedroom door.

For all Nathaniel Thorpe liked hunting and shooting and fishing and what-have-you, Vivian was relieved to discover that he also spent a lot of time in London. Young men did. Why wouldn't they? This was where the best parties happened. Vivian believed she simply couldn't live anywhere else, although when she said as much to her mother, Mrs Foster simply raised her eyebrows and commented that Vivian would live wherever her husband decided she'd live. Vivian had mumbled 'Poppycok' under her breath.

'What did you say?' asked Mrs Foster, who believed she had a right to her daughter's every thought.

'I said you're probably right, Mother.' Vivian threw out a disingenuous smile.

'I *am* right. I'm always right.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Mrs Foster had endeavoured to tell Vivian the basic facts of life, although she was keen to avoid going into embarrassing or tedious detail. Instead she offered three rules, two of which had subsections. One: Vivian was told never to travel alone in a railway carriage with a man. Two, she was never to contradict or interrupt a potential suitor when he was talking, though she should stop him if he tried to touch her body anywhere higher than her elbow or knee. Three, she was never to discourage any man who asked for a dance, but she should not allow a chap more than two dances in a row.

Vivian was aware that this was inadequate preparation for anything much, most of all a season.

Her friends were a far better source of information. Even before she came out, she'd heard the words adultery (something old marrieds did) and fornication (something maids and sluts did); and, more shocking still, therefore necessitating a Latin word, cunnilingus (something she couldn't imagine anyone really did).

She was curious.

In the past year, Vivian had sent herself to sleep by rubbing her stomach, a slow, circular caress. The tips of her fingers became familiar with every sensation her nightgown could provide: the smooth rise of embroidery, the flat glide of ribbon, the slight friction offered up by cotton. She liked to feel her bumpy ribs, the gentle inward curve of her waist and then the hardness of her hip bones. It wasn't long before she started to send herself to sleep by laying her hand flat on the mound that created a triangle between her hip bones and where her legs joined. It felt warm, safe, to leave it there. Then she wanted to know what it would feel like if there wasn't the barrier of fabric. She told herself there was no harm, it was her body. No one need know. Yet it stirred a sudden muted pang, a quickening of the beating of her heart.

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When she slipped off her bed socks and allowed one foot to stroke the other, she could almost imagine someone else touching her bare flesh. She moved the foot up her calf to the back of her knee. No one had ever touched the back of her knee. She had no idea! Soon it was only ever enough if her fingers crept up under the hem of the nightdress and danced across her entire body.

Yes, she was curious.

A few years older than Vivian, Nathaniel had already caused a stir in society. Everyone was mad about him. Vivian was all too well aware that she was not alone in thinking he was the one to catch. Wealth, youth, looks, he had it all. Vivian did not have wealth – at least not nearly enough – so she had to be very clever about the whole business. She'd never been much of a scholar; she had no interest in where countries lay on a map or the elements lay on the periodic table, but she was sharp enough to know that it did matter where men laid their affections. It was all that mattered.

Vivian was dressed beautifully; she was instructed to be careful and quiet, and to befriend Nathaniel's mother. They had been to dances, charity fund-raising lunches and afternoon tea together. Nathaniel and Vivian (and a necessary host of others who lent respectability to the flirtation) went to balls, cocktail bars, the opera and the ballet. She always singled him out for at least the first and last dance on her card. For the first four months she made sure to have a number of other partners and encouraged him to do the same. She didn't want him to feel trapped; she refused to appear desperate. In the past month she had become more focused. If he danced with other girls, she tried to sit with his mother and smiled on, making it clear that it was she who had made the choice. If she was forced to take a turn with someone else, she was sure to roll her eyes behind her partner's back, letting Nathaniel see her exasperation and preference. She made him laugh. He liked the fact that his mother adored her and thought

she was an angel; to him alone she revealed a hint of insolence, her ability to have fun, to be a devil.

It worked. He sent flowers and notes. He invited her to take tea at his house, not only with his mother but with an aunt too: obvious vetting. His people were all divinely aristocratic-looking: thin skins, bright eyes, glowing. Then last week he'd called at her house in Hampstead. Unfortunately Mr Foster wasn't in, so he'd walked around the small garden with her mother, faking an interest in the colourful geraniums that knelt in the borders. He appeared distracted, almost irritable. It was clear that he was disappointed not to have been able to ask permission from her father. He was not the sort of man who expected to be thwarted. As he left, he whispered to Vivian, 'I'd hoped to catch you alone.' She didn't have the chance to reply. What was she to say? Weren't boys funny? How could he have imagined she might be alone? Girls were never left alone. How wonderful, though, that he wanted her to himself.

It was the nervous nature of his visit that allowed them all to hope; that made Vivian absolutely *know*. She knew how it would go now. He would propose tonight and they would have a year-long engagement. Anything more was a bore; anything less meant they would not be able to guarantee a wedding at Westminster Abbey, something she longed for and something that was possible, as Nathaniel's father was a Knight Grand Cross. Spring weddings were a delight. They'd honeymoon in Europe. She didn't want to go to Egypt or Africa. The risk of peculiar diseases or bites from awful things was high, and besides, Vivian wouldn't be captured so often by the papers and illustrated weeklies if they travelled too far away. After a year she'd produce an heir. Then, eighteen months later, a spare. She'd decided she'd have up to three children. No more. More had an irretrievable effect on one's figure, no matter how young one was. They'd return to the Continent every August. She'd wear furs and pearls. She'd dance with dukes and earls. It would be heaven.

The preparations for tonight had to be perfect: a long bath

with scented salts, soft towels, and then clouds of lavender talcum powder. Vivian had found a dress that made everything else she owned – everyone owned – look insipid and lacking. She'd wanted a raspberry pink or even a scarlet. Her mother had declared that these colours were out of the question; she had to wear white, cream, silver perhaps. Mint was as far as Mrs Foster would go. Vivian was blond. Mint wouldn't work. Mint would be ruinous. Eventually they agreed on a pearl-coloured silk. Mrs Foster found the most fabulous roll in a darling London store. Vivian was secretly impressed, although she didn't indulge in a silly show of pleasure; she was cultivating a more sophisticated persona, and girlish shows of enthusiasm towards her mother over a roll of fabric were now unheard of (although she was still very willing to show displeasure).

A lot had depended on the cut. She was fed up of the same old pattern that she'd always worn, that every eighteen-year-old girl wore: short sleeves and round neck. Her mother had not suggested the local dressmaker for tonight; Hampstead was choked with women who, whilst undoubtedly competent with a needle, seemed very confused when Vivian tried to suggest they look at pictures in magazines for their inspiration. It was 1914! Queen Victoria was long dead. Her grandson was on the throne. Why couldn't they see how things had moved on? Why were the old so slow? The dress had to be made in Bond Street. Fortunately, Mrs Foster agreed. There had been two fittings. It had cost an obscenity but was worth every penny.

Vivian's underwear for tonight was thin white cambric lingerie from Eaton Lodge, the very place royalty had their trousseaus embroidered; no D. H. Evans mass-produced department store underwear for her. Mrs Foster knew the importance of investing and had not stinted; ever since Vivian had come out, she had been awfully well looked after. She had three or four pretty waltzing dresses, but this new one was her favourite. It had more. Held more. It was a promise.

She had enjoyed her preparations for this evening, which had begun at two this afternoon. Scrubbing, plucking, tweezing, brushing, painting and adorning all required time. She laid out her clothes, had the bath filled and steeped in it for simply ages. Nanny thought she'd catch her death bathing for such a long time and circled the room, wondering about lighting fires and muttering about the scanty nature of Vivian's underwear. It was hard not to dismiss Nanny as a silly woman who didn't understand. How she prattled on. Such nonsense. 'Now remember, Miss Vivian, a girl can only be safe if she marries well, or at least carefully, and she's not safe until then.' Vivian did not appreciate Nanny talking about her prospects so openly. It was vulgar. 'Everything has to be weighed up. His family, his wealth, his ambition, his character.'

'I know, Nanny. We all know.'

On Vivian's dressing table, candles in Victorian silver sticks burned. There was a bowl generously proffering apples, grapes and oranges (they were all keen for her to keep trim) and a cluster of family photographs showing relatives at their most stiff and serious. Vivian glanced at the one of her grandpa and let out a secret sigh of exasperation. She hardly remembered him – he'd died when she was seven – but when Nanny was blathering on, she often turned to these photos of her relatives for amusement or escape. Grandpa was a vague mass of hazy impressions. Pipe smoke, a large girth clad in a tartan waistcoat, a tickling beard that briefly brushed her forehead when she stood in front of him to say good night. He'd left his estate more untidy than he ought to have done. Clearly he'd counted on having a few more years to sort things out. Or perhaps he hadn't cared. He was rather a disappointing man. He'd inherited a pile and left less. Poor show. It was his fault Vivian had to make such an effort; if she'd been a little better off . . . well, it would have been easier to be noticed, to count. A decent dowry was so comforting.

'There is no use in falling in love with the first man who fills

your dance card and turns your head. None at all. What's the rush? That's what I say. What's the rush? You could enjoy two or three seasons,' declared Nanny. The Fosters couldn't afford two or three seasons, a fact Nanny was oblivious to but Vivian had been made well aware of. 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure. Everyone knows that's the case.'

Nanny knew nothing, of course. Still, one felt sorry for her. Her sort were not gifted a season. There must have been dancing. Must have. Dancing happened everywhere, but most likely for her it had taken place in tea rooms with dusty floors and curling sandwiches, not ballrooms with luminous chandeliers and gilded chairs. It was a pity but not everyone could be wealthy. Could they? No, they couldn't, it was an impossibility. Anyway, Nanny clearly hadn't been successful; if she had been, she wouldn't have wound up looking after someone else's children. She might have had some of her own, which would have been nice for her but not for the Fosters, because she was a good sort after all, good at what she did. Vivian conceded that on the whole she'd been a reliable and sensible nanny, neither too sentimental nor too strict.

'Who said that first, I wonder?'

'Said what?' Vivian snapped. She didn't mean to, but when Nanny talked she became less attentive, and the woman had forced a hair clip right into Vivian's scalp.

'Marry in haste, repent at leisure. Shakespeare, do you think? He said almost everything, didn't he? But then, not a man, surely. What have they to complain of? More likely something a woman would say. Lady Godiva, or Cleopatra.'

Vivian wished Nanny would simply leave her to get on. Concentrate on Susan, Toby and Babe as she was employed to do. There was no denying it: Vivian was beyond her now. Nanny would be no more use until Vivian had children of her own, and then she might hire her in her nursery. Or she might not. She might get a young girl with modern ways.

‘Help me into my dress.’

The dress was a success. Floating, transparent and delicate, it swathed her body, flattering and clinging to her breasts and waist, then flowing away to leave her bottom half to the imagination. It transformed her from girl to woman. At the fitting her mother had pronounced it too low cut and insisted that a lace trim be added to the neckline. At Vivian’s secret instruction the seamstress had tacked it in place so very lightly. A snip or two in the powder room tonight and there would be no sign of the veiling lace.

Then, when she was almost done, having decided between two different headdresses, Mrs Foster joined them. She did not knock. She never knocked. It was infuriating. Vivian comforted herself that after tonight, when it had all passed as it ought and she was no longer simply a girl but a fiancée, almost a married woman, Mother would be compelled to knock at her bedroom door. Surely.

‘Have you said good night to your sisters and Toby?’

‘I was just about to.’ Vivian liked to visit the nursery when she was all done up and looking magnificent. It sparked her sisters’ admiration and envy, which she was still young enough to luxuriate in.

‘Do. They are saying their prayers.’

Vivian resisted showing any irritation. Of course Susan was going through a religious phase; she was forever kneeling and fasting and she liked to wear plain clothes. It was a terrible affectation, and whilst Vivian had many affectations of her own, she was pleased to say faking religious fervour had never been one of them. Nanny, however, somehow knew that mentally Vivian was sighing in exasperation.

‘Your sister will do very well. Far better than you might imagine,’ she scolded.

Was that possible? Could Susan, ponderous in action, ever do well? Nanny turned to Mrs Foster. ‘I bet *you* know who said it,’

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she commented as she shook out the hem of Vivian's dress, carefully and somewhat unnecessarily. She was forever fussing, couldn't quite let go.

'Said what?' asked Mrs Foster.

'Marry in haste, repent at leisure.'

Mrs Foster stared coldly. It was as though the words had cast a shadow. 'William Congreve. Now come along, Vivian. We can't be late.'