

The Secret Intensity of Everyday Life

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Extract

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1

She recognizes the handwriting on the envelope. She drinks from her mug of tea, looks across the kitchen table at Henry, sees him absorbed in the triage of the morning post. One pile for the bin, one pile for later, one for now. He uses a paper knife when opening letters. Not a kitchen knife, an actual slender, dull-edged blade made for the purpose. The children silent, reading. Rain outside the windows puckering the pond.

Laura wills the letter to remain unnoticed. It's been forwarded from her parents' address.

'You know Belinda Redknapp?' she says.

'Should I?' Henry inattentive.

'One of the school mothers. You rather fancied her. Husband like a frog.'

'They all have husbands like frogs.'

The bankers, lawyers, insurance company executives whose children are their children's friends, whose wealth makes Henry feel poor.

'Anyway, she wants to meet Aidan Massey.'

Henry looks up, surprised.

'Why?'

'She thinks he's sexy.'

Carrie pauses her absorbed scrutiny of the *Beano*.

'Who's sexy?'

'The man on Daddy's programme.'

'Oh.'

'He's an evil dwarf,' says Henry. 'I want to kill him.'

The letter lies by her plate, immense as a beach towel, shouting her unmarried name: Laura Kinross. She wants to muffle it, mute it, gag it. Pick up a section of the newspaper, glance at it, lay it down just so. But

the desire inhibits the action. She's ashamed to discover that she means to leave the letter unopened until Henry has gone. So to mitigate the shame she makes no move to conceal the envelope, saying to Fate, See, I'm doing nothing. If I'm found out I'll accept the consequences.

Jack is interested in the proposal to kill Aidan Massey.

'How would you kill him, Daddy?'

'Hello, Jack. Good to have you with us.'

Laura frowns. She reaches out one hand to stop Jack smearing his sleeve in the butter. She hates it when Henry talks like that. Jack's too dreamy, he says.

'No, how?'

'Well.' Henry puts on the face he makes when summoning facts from his brain. He actually touches one finger to his brow, as if pressing a button. 'I'd tell the make-up girl to go on adding make-up until he couldn't breathe. Go on adding it until he's got no features left. Just smooth and round like a ball.'

Jack is awed silent by the detail.

Henry gathers up the pile of junk mail and takes it to the bin, which is already so full the lid won't close. He rams the wad of paper down hard. This action makes Laura flinch, because now it will be impossible to remove the bin bag without ripping it, but she says nothing. She is, it strikes her, lying low.

Henry reaches for his leather bag, which is bursting with printed matter.

'Oh, yes,' he tells Jack, suddenly remembering. 'I read your composition. I loved it.'

'Oh. Okay.'

'No. I did. I loved it.' He leans down for a kiss, Jack back reading *Tintin*. 'I'm off. Love you.'

Laura gets up. She moves slowly because she wants to move fast, to draw Henry out into the hall, out of sight of the letter. She squeezes between Carrie's chair and the dresser, remembering as she does so that last night Carrie had been in tears.

'Better now, darling?' she whispers as she passes.

'Yes,' says Carrie.

Laura knows her behaviour is undignified and unnecessary. Surely the past has lost its power. Twenty years ago almost, we're different people, I had long hair then. So did he.

‘When will you be home?’

‘Christ knows. I’ll try to be on the 6.47.’

Rain streaking the flint wall. He kisses her in the open front doorway, a light brush of the lips. As he does so he murmurs, ‘Love you.’ This is habitual, but it has a purpose he once told her. Henry suffers from bursts of irrational anxiety about her and the children, that they’ll be killed in a car crash, burned in a fire. He tells them he loves them every day as he leaves them because it may be the day of their death.

Recalling this, watching his familiar tall disjointed frame even as he steps out into the rain, Laura feels a quick stab of love.

‘I think that letter may be from Nick,’ she says.

‘Nick?’ His head turning back. Such a sweet funny face, droll as Stan Laurel, and that fuzz of soft sandy hair. ‘Nick who?’

‘Nick Crocker.’

She sees the name register. A family legend, or possibly ghost.

‘Nick Crocker! Whatever happened to him?’

‘I’ve no idea. I haven’t opened the letter yet.’

‘Oh, well.’ Henry shakes open an umbrella. ‘Got to rush. Tell me this evening.’

Nothing urgent in his curiosity. No intimation of danger. His footsteps depart over the pea-beach gravel towards the Golf, parked in front of the garage that is never used for cars. Laura goes back into the kitchen and harries the children into readiness for the school run. She’s glad she told Henry, but the fact remains that she left the telling to the last minute. She had known it in the same moment that she had recognized the handwriting. She would open the letter alone.

A dull roar in the drive heralds the arrival of Alison Critchell’s Land Cruiser. This immense vehicle parts the falling rain like an ocean liner. Laura stands under an umbrella by the driver window conferring with Alison on the endless variables of the run. Jack and Carrie clamber in the back.

‘Angus is staying late for cricket coaching. Phoebe may be having a sleepover at the Johnsons. Assume it’s on unless I call.’ The litany of names that bound Laura’s life. ‘Assume the world hasn’t ended unless you see flaming chariots in the sky.’

‘What if they cancel the chariots?’

‘The bastards. They would, too.’

The wry solidarity of school-run mothers. Laura confirms all she needs to know.

‘So it’s just my two at five.’

She waves as they drive off. Carrie is demanding about the waving. Laura must wave as long as they remain in sight. The car is so wide it creates a hissing wake through the spring verges, and the cow parsley rolls like surf. The drenched morning air smells keen, expectant. Who is it who loves the month of May? ‘I measure the rest of my life by the number of Mays I will live to see.’ Henry, of course, ever death-expectant. How could he have slipped so far from her mind?

Seated now at her work desk in what was once the dairy Laura Broad addresses the day ahead. Deliberate and unhurried, she makes a list of people she must call and things she must do. The letter lies unopened before her. This is how as a child she ate Maltesers. One by one she would nibble off the chocolate, leaving the whitish centres all in a row. Then pop, pop, pop, in they would go one on top of the other, in an orgy of delayed gratification. Even so it sometimes seemed to her as she tracked the precise moment of pleasure unleashed that there was a flicker of disappointment. Here I am, whispered the perfect moment. I am now. I am no longer to come.

She studies her list. ‘Call Mummy about Glyndebourne.’ Does being organized mean not being creative? ‘Laura possesses the ability to achieve set tasks,’ a teacher wrote when she was thirteen years old. Even then she had felt the implied criticism: a follower not a leader. A natural aptitude for cataloguing. Henry said once, ‘You’d make a good fanatic.’ He can be surprisingly perceptive. No, that’s unfair. Henry is capable of great perception; only he isn’t always looking. He never notices what I’m wearing.

‘Tell me when you’re wearing something special and I’ll comment on it,’ he says.

‘But haven’t you got eyes? Can’t you see?’

Apparently not.

Back then she had bought her clothes in charity shops. It’s easy when you’re young.

She phones her mother.

‘This weather!’ her mother says. ‘I’m praying it’ll clear by Saturday. Diana says it’s going to get worse.’

Saturday is the opening night of the Glyndebourne season. They're all going, Laura and Henry, her sister Diana and Roddy, courtesy of their loving parents.

'Don't listen to Diana, Mummy. You know she hates it when people are happy.'

This is true. Diana the ambitious one, Laura the pretty one. Some quirk in the sibling dynamic dictated from an early age that Diana takes life hard, and requires the world to reflect this. But she has her good moments, she can be loyal and generous. Never so loving as when Laura is miserable.

'We can picnic on the terrace, I suppose. What will you wear?'

'I don't know,' says Laura. 'I haven't thought.'

'Diana's bought something from a shop in St Christopher's Place. I forget where, but she sounds terrifically pleased with it.'

'How's Daddy's back?'

'Pretty hellish. I have to put his socks on for him in the morning. Doctors can't cure backs, you know. They just shrug their shoulders.'

What will I wear? Laura wonders as she puts down the phone. She reviews her wardrobe in her mind's eye. Her current favourite, a green Ghost dress, is too light for a chilly May evening. As for her beloved vintage Alaïa, the truth is she no longer has the figure for it. Not bad for forty-two and two children, but there was a time when she could fit into anything.

Maybe I should zip up to London tomorrow.

This idea, suddenly planted, blossoms fiercely. There's barely time between school runs but it can be done. Glyndebourne opening night is a grand affair, and it's not often she gets a chance to dress up these days. There was a time when she turned heads.

She takes up the waiting letter and looks again at the handwriting that forms her name. A rapid careless scrawl in fine black fountain pen, effortlessly stylish. Every stroke premeditated, therefore the carelessness an illusion, an achieved effect. But she hadn't known that back then.

She opens the envelope. Headed letter paper, an unfamiliar address in London. No salutation. No Dear Laura, Dearest Laura, Darling Laura, nothing. As always.

Well, seems like I'm back in the old country for a few weeks. Drunk

on England in spring. Walked yesterday in a bluebell wood so perfect it tempts my heathen soul to seek a Creator. How are you? Who are you? Shall we meet and compare notes on the vagaries of life's journey?

No signature, not even an initial. She smiles, shakes her head, both touched and irritated that he has changed so little. What right does he have to assume she remembers? And yet of course she remembers.

She opens the bottom left-hand drawer of her desk, the place where she keeps the family memorabilia. Birthday cards from the children, paintings they did in class long ago, letters from Henry. She fumbles all the way to the bottom, and there finds a sealed envelope she should have thrown away years ago, but has not. She takes it out and places it on the desk before her.

The envelope is addressed: 'For N.C., one day.'

She remembers writing it, but not the words she wrote. Ridiculous to have kept it for so long.

The flap of the envelope yields easily without tearing the paper. Inside is a thin red ribbon, a strip of four photo-booth pictures, a short note in Nick's handwriting, and her letter.

She gazes at the pictures. In the top one he's smiling at the camera, at her. In the bottom one he has his eyes closed.

She starts to read the letter. As she reads, tears come to her eyes.

Dear Nick. I'm writing this not long after you asked me to leave you. I'll give it to you when you ask me to come back.

The phone rings. Hurriedly, as if caught in a shameful act, she puts the envelope and its contents back in the desk drawer.

'So is it going to rain or isn't it?' Diana's phone conversations always begin in the middle. 'God, don't you hate England?'

2

She saw him coming down the carriage, swaying with the movement of the train, his eyes scanning left and right for an empty seat. She slid her canvas tote-bag over the table towards her, so creating a space that the stranger would feel permitted to occupy: an unthinking act of invitation which he accepted. His long body folded into the seat facing her. In the moment of glancing eye contact he smiled, making fine wrinkles round his eyes. He took out a book and opened it where a postcard marked his place. The book was a dark-bound library edition, and though she tried, she couldn't discover its title. The postcard, which lay on the table before her, was a painting of classical figures round a tomb. So he was a student like her.

She gazed out of the train window at the passing scene. The train entered a cutting. His reflection formed before her eyes, and she was free to look without restraint. He was handsome, his strong features framed and softened by a tangle of chestnut curls. He wore a denim jacket over a check long-sleeved shirt, the cuffs unbuttoned. Round his neck on a leather thong was a single mottled ceramic bead. He read intently, moving only to turn the page. She studied his hand in reflection, admiring the long fine fingers, noting the bitten nails.

He did not look at her. He seemed to be unaware of her. His indifference on this, their first encounter, won her respect.

She asked Katie O'Keefe later, 'Do you think that a man who wears a bead round his neck is gay?'

Katie screwed up her face to consider.

'One bead?'

'Quite a big one. Kind of tortoiseshell.'

'Bent as a poker,' said Hal Ashburnham.

'Pokers aren't bent.'

'It's all about where you put it, isn't it? In *here* it's straight. In *here*, it's bent.'

The following evening she went to a party given by Richard Clements in his college rooms. She had an essay to finish and worked long into the evening, so by the time she arrived the party was noisy and crowded. Felix Marks cornered her almost at once. He spoke to her intently but inaudibly while her eyes searched the room.

Richard had told Laura that Felix was in love with her, though how this could be, or even what it meant, Laura didn't know. Love that is offered but not returned is just words, surely, a nothingness, a whistle in the dark.

Why have I never been in love?

Nineteen years old and no shortage of offers. She caught sight of herself reflected in the uncurtained window panes, a shine of dark-blond hair, a pale face, serious eyes. Why do I let Felix whisper secrets to me? Because I want to be liked. Liked but not loved. Admire me but don't touch me. No, not that. Touch me, love me, but only you, whoever you are, and only when I'm ready, whenever that may be.

Richard found her and rescued her.

'Someone you have to meet,' he said.

He had his back to her but she recognized him at once. He turned at Richard's touch and looked at Laura and smiled.

'We've met already.'

'You've met already?' Richard was hurt. 'No one told me.'

'Not exactly met,' said Laura.

So he had noticed her after all. He was smoking a Gitane, its acrid smell reaching her like a low growl. There was music playing behind the clatter of voices. Jackson Browne.

Honey you really tempt me
 You know the way you look so kind
 I'd love to stick around but I'm running behind . . .

'Laura Kinross. This is Nick Crocker.'

3

Plumpton racecourse in the rain. White rails lonely without a crowd, just fields really. Woman reading *Vogue* has great legs. Catch Barry before the meeting, ask about changing the screen credit, written and directed by Henry Broad, it's called intellectual property, Barry. Not that I'm not grateful. Barry knows I took the job after eight months developing projects as they say, no one in television ever being out of work, merely unpaid. Though Jesus knows it's not as if even now they pay what they call in the City shed loads. You take a garden shed and fill it with twenties all the way up to the bituminous-felt-clad roof and you give it to a man like a frog as his reward for gambling with other people's money. The frog man buys a pretty young wife and a house in the country with a paddock for his pretty young daughter's pony, he takes the train to London every morning, he sits at his work station and fondles money, tosses money, jerks money until it spasms more money, on through the day, no lunch, into the evening hours. Daughter untucked, wife unfucked, shed reloaded.

Ah, sweet envy, balm of my soul. No, this isn't about money, Barry. This costs you nothing. This is about self-respect.

Woman reading *Vogue* has truly terrific legs. Can't see her face. Skirt with buttons up the front, one button missing, tights with a run on one side, not one of those glossy women you'd be afraid to touch. Rest my idle gaze on her crotch. Will she sense it? Play the mind game. Push up her skirt, reveal the let's say white triangle of her panties, white so much sexier than black or red. Translucent white fabric, dark crinkle of pubic hair. Look away. Down comes *Vogue*. Face worn and warm, rumpled, attractive. Tired eyes don't see me. Only a game. The secret life of commuters. They say men think of sex every seven seconds. Six seconds of rest, then.

Rain streaking on dirty windows. Look at it closely and it's got its own logic, pattern, form. They say you can see beauty in anything but then when everything is beautiful what's left to deliver the shock of beauty? A runnel of rain storming aslant this window bold and grey-gleaming to its disintegration and death. Yes I know, yes sometimes I catch it, the beauty lies not in the thing seen but in the quality of the seeing and that comes rarely, that charged intensity, and can't be willed. Takes a good night's sleep and a full stomach, or possibly starvation and exhaustion, but not vulgar busyness, the people's drug of choice, the trivial pursuit, the shrinking from thinking, the visceral dread of thought.

Me too, I'm no different. Later, I say, I'm busy. Then later, I say, I'm tired. And those big eyes watch without understanding as I pretend to read the paper. Daddy will you play a game with me? But I deserve my down time. Don't I do enough? Not enough never enough no never enough.

The train carriage is the old slam-door design, bought from British Rail by a consortium of former Southern Region managers and sold on at enormous profit to their successor, the French-owned railway company Connex. The seats are laid out in open stalls of four, twenty stalls to a coach, which gives a maximum capacity of eighty passengers. This morning as the train rolls through the grey rain-soaked light of the Sussex weald there are ninety-eight men and women packed into the one coach, because ever since the Hatfield crash the timetables have been in chaos and fewer trains have been running.

The early morning commuters, whether sitting or standing, read newspapers as they travel, the headlines offered outwards like credentials of rank. 'Cabinet falls out over cure for sterling.' 'Dame Liz pines for love of her life.' Only Henry Broad, unshielded by newspaper, magazine or book, sits exposed to the gaze of all, were any of the other travellers to have a mind to look at him: a tall, slender man in a brown denim jacket worn over a charcoal-grey crew-neck cotton jersey. He's in his mid-forties, his soft sandy hair cut fuzzy short, his face just a little too long to be handsome, a little too hesitant to be commanding, in the clumsy English fashion. Only his eyes might attract a second glance, because he alone in the carriage is looking about him. His eyes are hazel in colour, wide-set and striking, especially now as they move

over the scene before him, animated by a lively nervous curiosity. He is sitting with his arms folded across his legs, his knee lightly touching the knee of the woman opposite, who is reading *Vogue*.

Yesterday evening Laura showed him a copy of a school composition written by his eleven-year-old son Jack. It was about a journey that takes place in a dream. The dreamer is walking along a path that turns into the top of a high wall, a wall so high that below it there are clouds.

When he woke this morning, Henry remembered that single page, those few lines, and experienced a wave of giddiness. He held the hard white edge of the bathroom basin and bowed his head, as the nausea passed through him. After a few moments he felt all right again, except his head seemed to be empty. What had happened? He interrogated himself as he shaved, seeking the source of the sudden sensation, which he recognised as misery. Why should Jack's composition make him miserable? Because once long ago he too had written stories that came to him like dreams, and were about journeys. Because there was a strangeness and a wonder in his son that had once been in him, and had become lost. Because he was not living the life he had meant to live.

My signature defect: indecisiveness. A tendency to see both sides of every question. Take iconoclasm. When Archbishop Laud speaks of 'the beauty of holiness' I say yes, the holy must be beautiful. God, being perfect, must be beautiful. But when William Dowsing leads his men into Pembroke College chapel and cries, 'Tear down the idols!', when his righteous hammer strikes the friable stone and the saint's face crumbles, I feel the excitement of the act, the outrage against superstition, the sheer bravado of defacement. This is original, no? Iconoclasts have had a bad press over the years. The evil dwarf Aidan Massey is not the author of this insight, for Christ's sake his special period is the Tudors, when it comes to the Civil War I know as much as him. So does Christina, one year out of Edinburgh University, three months' research and she's master of her subject. Mistress. But the professor gets the credit. The world turned upside down.

Where does an eleven-year-old boy get an idea like that? Walking on walls and below only clouds.

She's put her magazine down and closed her eyes. Such a sexy

bruised face. Why these thoughts from a happily married man? My six seconds have expired. Things I want and haven't got. Hard to speak simple words. Why didn't I say more to Jack this morning? Breakfast the least serious time of day. And then there's Laura, sharer of my life, mother of my children. How come I daydream of sex with a stranger on a train? Fifteen years married and still a certain shyness, or a delicacy maybe. Not good form to love your wife and desire other women. Things I feel but can't admit. Suppose I were to say it. Hurt, lack of comprehension, perhaps even disgust. Driven out of the house like a dog with muddy paws.

The house Laura's father's money bought. The school fees Laura's father's money pays. And in this morning's post an insurance bill for over two thousand. Last month's credit cards not yet paid, oil for central heating running at four hundred a quarter, both cars due for servicing, even the water bill's a killer these days. And there's a tax bill coming up in two months that I do not have. But no, I'm not asking for more money, Barry. This isn't about money. Call it justice, if you like. Call it honourable behaviour. Call it an end to idolatry.

I must remember to ask Jack about his dream, maybe at the weekend when we've got time. A walk on the Downs on Sunday, maybe go into the secret valley, we could get as far as the lost monument if we give it enough time. The children always pull faces and say they hate walks.

You walk everywhere on the tops of walls, you can go anywhere you like, only don't fall because the walls are so high there's only clouds down there. And beneath the clouds? Ah, there's the question. A happy land of wine and roses. More clouds, more nothing. Or just falling, falling for ever.

Uncrossing her legs. Eyes closed but she won't be asleep. What makes one woman sexy and another not? Nothing to do with beauty. You can just feel it, or maybe it's a smell.

Beeble-beeble-beeble. Her phone.

'Hello? Yes. No, I can't do it, Tom. I wish, I wish. Ask Sally. I don't know.'

Here am I, inches away from her, and she's talking to someone invisible, someone far away. Her face makes expressions for her distant friend, but it's I, the close stranger, who witnesses them.

'I can't do your job for you, Tom. It's hard enough doing my own.'

Something in the fashion world? Not quite groomed enough. Could be publishing. Though Christ knows television has its share of dossers.

‘Hi, Sally, it’s Liz Dickinson, eight something Wednesday morning, just wanted to warn you Tom’s on the scrounge. I’m out for lunch, catch you later.’

It’s like being at the theatre, a one-woman play. The overheard life. *Rear Window* in audio. Maybe she’s committed a murder.

‘Jane? It’s Liz. Look, huge apologies, I’m not going to be able to make it after all. I would, but I have to get back for Alice. She hates me leaving her with my mother.’

What makes her believe her phone calls are private? I’m listening and learning. Or at least guessing.

‘No, I’m having lunch with Guy. Not a chance. No, I mean it. I keep in touch for Alice’s sake, she needs a father, and he’s the only one she’s got, God help her.’

So she’s a single mother. Someone wrote a whole book about picking up single mothers, the idea being that they’re more up for it, though I don’t see why. Not with me at least. Particularly as I’m married and even to think such thoughts is beyond the bounds of acceptable behaviour. What Jimmy Carter called ‘adultery of the heart’, which happens every day, every hour, and means nothing but is still a secret. How could I ever tell Laura? We’re close, we talk, there’s trust, but beyond the lamplight lies *terra incognita*, dark continents, the beauty of unholiness.

Do other husbands feel this way? If so, what a strange world we live in. Every man an almost-adulterer, constrained by decency, habit, squeamishness, lack of opportunity. No, there’s more than that, there’s something honourable, a refusal to inflict pain on one you love. But even so, the desire remains. The desire concealed. The secret carried in men’s eyes, we recognize it in each other, but we don’t speak the words.

‘Because he’s a two-timing bastard. Three-timing, ten-timing. He can’t help himself. I don’t blame him any more, that’s just how some men are, it’s not personal.’

Some men. But which men? Women know the worst about some men, but the man they love, the father of their children, he’s the exception to the rule. He doesn’t fantasize about sex with strangers on trains. Why would he need it when he has a good sex life with his wife at home?

Why indeed?

The train is passing over the Balcombe viaduct. Henry looks out through the rain-blurred windows at the green fields and woods. He likes this stretch of the journey, always watches out for it, the train raised high over the wide and peaceful scene. He has made something of a speciality of landscapes, you could say he collects views; and not views in isolation, views according to the time of day, the weather, the time of year. Thus his home view from Edenfield Hill looking towards Mount Caburn and the plain of the weald is at its most perfect on an early spring morning when there are high clouds in the sky and low sunlight spills over the land. He treasures his views precisely because they are not collectable, you catch them by chance, most days the light is too flat or the cloud cover too low. These days he rarely finds the time to go view-hunting because his hours at work are getting longer.

He pulls an orange paper file from the bag beneath his seat and settles down to prepare for his script meeting. Forty minutes or so still to go to Victoria. The rain seems to be passing.

It's very simple, Barry. What I'm asking for isn't a favour, it's a fundamental issue of justice. Also it happens to make me extremely angry.

He takes out a pencil and writes on the top of the script:
'Break something.'