

The Fit

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Extract

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A man who has nothing is nothing. A man who exchanges what he has for what no one could want: he learns to become even less than that.

When I woke up, my wife had gone. The night before, there had been three suitcases lined up at the foot of the bed in order of size. They were gone, too. They had looked like giant wallets: I now thought I could have asked about them before we had argued and gone to sleep.

Where my wife's head should have been, on the pillow, there was a letter. It had been put there squarely, carefully, like the chocolates luxury hotels leave for their guests. Janet had sealed it, though no one else would be likely to open and read it: I opened it, I read it.

It was a clear bright morning in May. May the first: a clean blue day, laid out for you behind glass. Janet must have opened the window before she left. The thin curtains flapped in the breeze. I lay down again, my hands behind my head, and stretched myself, thinking.

After a time, I jackknifed out of bed. When I opened the wardrobe doors, I saw that most of her clothes were

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gone, too. I pulled out a crimson shirt with ruffles; a pair of green velvet trousers; a pair of cartoon socks I bought at an airport once; and a pair of pale blue underpants. All these I laid carefully on the end of the bed, ready for me to put on when I had finished my breakfast.

A man whose wife has left him: he can become a bachelor, can breakfast in his pyjamas.

The clothes I had set out, they were not my normal clothes. They were unlike everything else in my orderly wardrobe of grey suits and white shirts. That was why I laid them out. I never needed to hunt for pairs of socks, since all my socks were exactly the same, this cartoon pair aside. I don't wear pale blue underpants, and couldn't tell you why underpants should be manufactured in a colour so perfectly designed to show up skidmarks, if any.

I went downstairs into the kitchen. The house was empty. 'Hello? Hello?' I called, almost as if summoning the dog we don't have. Irrationally, I wondered whether there would be another letter from my wife in the kitchen – in case I'd missed the one on the pillow. But there wasn't one. I switched on the kettle.

'Breakfast,' I said in a reasonable voice. 'Breakfast, in the garden.'

Why not? I unlocked the back door. I made a cup of coffee. I poured a glass of orange juice. I put them on a tray, and went outside, still in my pyjamas. It was quite warm enough to breakfast outside. The sun was shining. My wife had left me. I had an entire day in front of me. 'This is the first day of –' I thought. I had an outfit of unforgivable lunacy awaiting upstairs. I looked at the

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garden. It struck me with astonishment. I didn't look after it and my wife didn't look after it, but here it was with the blossom foaming over the fruit trees, the blossoms round and weighty as Japanese chignons in the sun. I had carried out many boring and inexplicable tasks in my life. I had passed grade three clarinet with merit. I had compiled indexes to the memoirs of elderly ex-ambassadors. But today I felt as if every one of those pointless tasks had gone towards qualifying me for my present ambiguous state. Millions of candidates had been examined, but only I had been selected to sit, wifeless, in the lovely garden in the sun.

It was then that I began to hiccup.

'!' I said.

When one strange thing happens, others soon follow, like ducklings after their mother.

A shadow fell across the white-painted iron table. I looked up, squinting in the dazzle, to find a stranger in my garden. There was a small girl standing in front of me, observing me with open curiosity. I hadn't seen her coming. She was just there. For a minute or so we examined each other closely, as if each of us was in possession and silently quizzing an intruder. When she spoke, her head tilted on one side, she took the tone of any housewife who had found a pyjamaed stranger taking a leisurely breakfast on her terrace.

'What are you doing?' she said. Her voice was surprisingly husky, and I took another look. At first, I had thought she was a girl of eleven or twelve. But now I looked, her face was lined, as very thin faces are. She was

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thin; she was tiny; she could have been twenty or forty. Her face was still stranger than her question.

‘It’s my garden,’ I said, collecting myself. ‘I’m not doing anything.’

She shrugged.

‘I meant what are you doing showing off your dooberies like that,’ she said. ‘It shouldn’t be allowed.’

It was an old pair of pyjamas, overdue for replacement. I had wondered why the breeze was so refreshing, and hastily covered myself up with the only thing to hand, a saucer.

‘I often come through here,’ she said, conversationally. ‘It’s ever such a useful short cut, through your garden. Never seen anyone here before, though.’

For a moment we were at a loss for words. I looked at her; she looked at me; I had a saucer over my genitals.

‘You don’t mind, do you?’ she said. ‘Using your garden as a short cut, I mean?’

‘I’m not mad about it,’ I said. ‘I can’t stop you. It’s a right of way.’

‘There’s a right of way through your garden?’ she said.

‘!’ I said.

‘You’ve got the hiccups,’ she said dispassionately.

‘It’s just started,’ I said.

‘My name’s Susie,’ she said. ‘Have you tried drinking a glass of water backwards?’

‘!’ I said.

‘It doesn’t really work, that one, anyway,’ she said. She narrowed her eyes, inspecting me, then slowly as a consultant she walked round me. ‘Hmm,’ she said.

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‘What’s this plant called?’ She indicated a pot on the terrace.

‘It’s a bay tree.’ She went on. ‘That’s a dahlia,’ I said. ‘It’s a pelargonium – wistaria – fuchsia –’ and on she went, for five minutes. She circled the whole garden, indicating each plant in turn, nodding kindly at each correct answer, and then she was back by my side.

‘And finally to score one hundred bonus points and win that two-week holiday in Baghdad what –’ she said, pointing downwards like a dowser – ‘do you call this?’

‘That’s called grass,’ I said.

‘Hmm,’ she said. She flopped down quite abruptly on the lawn. She seemed to have finished her game for the moment. ‘I’ve phoned in sick today,’ she said. ‘It’s shocking, really. I do it all the time. I’m not sick at all. I never am. Have you thrown a sickie, too, or do you count hiccups?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I work at home mostly. My wife left me this morning.’

This did not appear to interest her enormously; she nodded slowly.

‘Why do you call in sick when you’re not?’ I said.

‘Because if you go to work you don’t learn anything, and if you call in sick, by ten thirty in the morning, you’ve learnt the names of twenty plants, and they’ll pay you anyway. Listen, I know what’ll fix your hiccups, a nice glass of champagne.’

‘I don’t drink,’ I said.

‘I’ll be back in a tick,’ she said. ‘I only live over there. It’s medicinal, it doesn’t count.’

'But I don't drink,' I said.

'Do you know why she's gone, your wife?' Susie said.

'She left me a letter,' I said.

'Right,' Susie said, walking off. 'Back in a tick.' As she went, I heard her murmuring with concentration, 'Dahlia, pelargonium, grass, tree, wistaria, hydrangea . . .'

She had not asked about the contents of Janet's letter. I would not have known what to say: it was not her business. It had been a short letter, and a strange one: it had mentioned my wardrobe; it had spoken about the fact that I had taken a part-time job working for an old lady in Hampstead without telling Janet about it; it had spoken about needs of my wife's which I had no conception of; and it had misspelt the word 'possessive' twice. Imagine: I was married to someone who could not spell the word 'possessive', and never knew it. It was not Susie's business, or yours; though, reader, you will either send or be sent precisely the same letter at some point in your life, and you can imagine or remember it.

The word 'sanguine' means 'bloody' if you think about it. Well, actually, if you think about it, the word 'sanguine' doesn't mean 'bloody' at all.

The girl whose name was Susie had gone away. I didn't see her come and I didn't see her go. In a garden in Wandsworth, a man sat in his pyjamas with a saucer over his groin. That was me. I sat and thought about the events of the last twelve hours. I had gone to sleep and woken up. When I woke up, I had lost a wife and three extremely nice suitcases.

'!' I said, to the empty garden. The tock in my throat

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was immodest, unmuted, raucous. Seventeen seconds passed. '!' I said.

Wife, suitcases. I had laid out my clothes. I had made a cup of coffee. I had met a girl called Susie who was too thin, with hair like a swatch of yellow silk. I had started to hiccup. Those were the things which had happened in the previous twelve hours. I thought about them in a sanguine way.

I am an indexer by profession. I write, or extract, indexes from what other people have written. Their labour is anguished and mine is calm. There is a poet called Wordsworth who said that indexes are emotion recollected in tranquillity. Well, of course he did not, but that is quite a good thing to say and I am saying it.

At this moment I examined my life in an indexing sort of way. I looked at it in the way I would look at a fat tormented manuscript someone else had written.

Girl called Susie, I noted.

Hiccups, I noted.

Suitcases, I noted.

Wife, departure of, I noted.

It all seemed more or less equally significant as I sat in the garden with a saucer on my groin. I supposed that, in time, some of these things would become more important than others. With a certain effort, I made myself consider some of these things, made myself imagine the subheadings which in time would be attached to these headings.

My wife, I acknowledged, had gone. I considered ejaculations of grief, none of which seemed quite suitable to

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produce to an audience of dahlias. My wife has gone, I said again, as serious as a wardrobe. Something had led up to that and perhaps I ought to try to understand what had happened. And then after that perhaps I ought to try to think in a responsible way about the future. When your wife leaves then it changes your life, mostly. How should one continue with a life, having once made a tragic ejaculation in an empty garden?

'!' I said.

It is so hard to be distraught and heartbroken if you have the hiccups. That's what I think, anyway.

Susie was coming up the path now with a bottle of champagne in her hand. She was so tiny that it looked like a magnum.

'Not got dressed, then, I see,' she said.

'I don't drink,' I said.

'Oh, this isn't drink,' she said. 'This is medicine. Think of it like that. Listen, I predict that you'll have two glasses and your hiccups will have gone. They've not gone, have they?'

We both listened, like naturalists waiting for the call of the tawny owl.

'!' I said.

'No,' she said.

'Predict some more,' I said.

'That's a hydrangea,' she said knowledgeably. 'I predict – I predict –'

'!' I said.

'Plop,' the champagne went.

'I predict that you'll make some money this week. That

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you'll meet a dark stranger with blue eyes who will tell you three lies and one true thing. If you follow a cat tomorrow week, it will lead you to an old friend. And I predict that your wife will come back on a rainy Friday. There. Drink two glasses of that, and they'll have gone.'

'I like your predictions,' I said.

'Oh, I'm good, I'm very good,' she said. 'You won't forget my name, will you? Susie? I'm going now. I like you, you teach me stuff.' She was skipping away now, and I watched her going, not knowing whether she was old or young, irritating or enchanting, right or wrong. 'I'll tell you something else,' she called over her shoulder, her thin voice fading as she went. 'The next time we meet, it'll be in my garden and not yours . . .'

The strangest thing was this: I did not see this girl again through all the events which followed that month. I only saw her again when it was all nearly over. Her predictions were all wrong, and I had nothing to guide me through that hiccupping month. No, not quite nothing; it seemed to me that two things stayed with me, all that mad month: her voice accompanying me everywhere, promising me that when we next met, it would be in her garden. Her serious voice, that was the first thing. The second were my hiccups.