DON'T EAT IT WITH CHOCOLATE

A Novel

NORMAN KING LLOYD

DON'T EAT IT WITH CHOCOLATE

by

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To-night those soft-fringed eyes shall close
Beneath one roof, my Queen! with mine.

(Calais Sands – Matthew Arnold)

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One…

Every November, I treat myself to a 'Special Romance'.

For affairs of the heart, November is right up there, top of the charts. The weather may be damp and dreary but this makes the charms of your lover even more alluring. You've had this long walk by the river and because you'd forgotten to close the hotel window, your room is full of the most wonderful aroma of bonfires. Or, after a cosy afternoon at a cinema in town, your girlfriend's perky little beret flies off in a sudden gust of wind and you dash across a wet and busy main road… before going on to a rather chintzy old fashioned hotel in Chelsea, with a lift so tiny that intimacy begins with laughs and plentiful kisses.

Of course, I tell my wife everything! When I confide to Marie about the latest new season's love (she calls it my Beaujolais moment) and knows my rule inside out – that I start in November and always finish each affair twelve days before Christmas. She tells me: 'Because I know what you're doing and its just a hobby, you're not really being unfaithful, are you?'

During these shenanigans, I carry on with my job as a house husband. In a way, it's an ideal occupation for me. As for Marie, she travels a lot as top honchette of 'Bistro Dogs'. They keep us in a lot more than dog food.

My game is to patrol the sweet heavens of girl emporiums. It's an ever changing field of play but the old stalwarts remain or did until recently: The National Gallery and St Paul's were places where plentiful supply has recently led to disappointments. These days, the damsels in those overheated rooms of renaissance flesh seem to be mostly made up of young Chinese. Cute, but not my cup of Ming and the last time I ventured into Wren's masterpiece it was packed with fat old Mexicans. The big stores are always useful but often instead of finding 'her', I would usually end up buying something stupid and expensive that I did not really need.

Here, I should advise all shiny new men, maiden aunts of the flower power era, feminists, young ladies of sparky dispositions and all Aga owning, middle-class women, to look away, now! I am, I freely admit, a throwback.

To continue: there is a new market place: Hotels. Some of our best hotels are now little more than knocking shops! Full of bold inquisitive Spanish waitresses, Lebanese Lulu's and slutty Eastern Europeans bed-makers. But first, a little digression about last year's November…

… It was November the 23rd and as you can imagine, in a considerable state of desperation, I entered a famous Oxford Street store intent on making my way to 'Lingerie'. As I went past the various 'Parfumerie' counters, holding my breath, for I can't stand the cloying smell; a tall brunette assistant I'd been eyeing favourably, suddenly collapsed and vanished from behind the counter. Her customer looked at me in disgust, mumbling something about 'starvation' and marched away. I lent over the counter and looked down. The girl was lying in a contorted fashion against some cardboard boxes. I looked around. The little drama had gone unnoticed by the other assistants. As it was only twenty minutes after opening time, the place was relatively empty. I swung myself over the counter and awaited screams of outrage. None came. I bent down and took hold of the girl's hand. She opened her eyes and mumbled something in French. Another customer was looming above me so I stood up and said in a quiet voice: 'Sorry, Madam, but there's this dreadful old bug going around the store – it's probably in the air conditioning, and this poor young woman,' I pointed to my feet, 'has fainted, so I would advise you try the next counter.'

The woman made a bee line for the exit.

I knelt down again and briefly touched her elegant long legs then carefully put one of her shoes back on. The girl got up slowly and whispered in English: 'I have only the six cups of tea in two days. I must need to eat.'

I suggested the snack bar upstairs but she shook her head. 'I want to take in good Oxford Street air.'

We walked out of the store, unnoticed. 'I lose my job, I think but who care!' she laughed as we approached Hyde Park. We had a brief bit of sustenance at the Café in the Park and then sat in a couple of deck chairs. She asked: 'Tell me what is it that you do? I mean… you like rescue poor girls everyday?'

'I'm a film director.'

She perked up at this news.

‘But a film director without a film!’ I laughed and went into a panegyric of the great French directors I loved only to discover that she liked Swedish cartoons about donkeys.

‘A film of mine is showing in Canada at the moment and another one scooped a minor prize at Cannes a couple of years back.’

I was on safe ground as I knew a fair bit about Canada as Marie was always going there. ‘I have a great script - it’s about a man who meets his daughter again after not seeing her since she was a baby… and the daughter of course does not recognise him… but I need someone to show interest and cash.’

She took my arm and said sadly: ‘If only I had the money, I would get you big prize at Cannes and we would walk together the red magical carpet. Perhaps, I can be the daughter in film you make?’

I never got round to answering her because I had one of the most dreadful shocks of my life. Arm in arm, with a tall suntanned man, was my dear wife! My wife was strolling across the bloody park with a man! I watched them lingering for a while at the edge of the Serpentine. Was she not supposed to be in New York promoting ‘Teeny Bites for Snacking Pooches’? I quickly made a date with the French girl for dinner that evening and muttering something about being late for an appointment with my agent, made my way to the café where I had just seen them go in. But they were definitely not there. Maybe Marie had needed to return for some work crisis and the man was just a colleague. Then I had a brainwave, I would go to her office. I was well liked there, especially by her assistant Colette.

Marie’s office in Dean Street was closed. Then I had to dash down the nearest alley and was sick. The time: just ten past two. Perhaps everyone was having a late lunch. Disappointed and with this horrible taste in my mouth I went into a pub and had a bag of crisps and some beer and then saw a film. Strangely enough, it was a film about a donkey. I made my way back to the office. It was now about six-thirty and the lights were on.

Colette was leaving as I pushed open the door. 'Why, hello!' she blushed. 'I think Marie's still here. Bye.'

I stood in reception, shivering. These modern offices with temperamental air conditioning were a curse. I heard not a sound. No phone ringing. No mumbled conversation. The lights were dimmed in the corridor where I thought my wife worked. What should I do? I helped myself to a plastic beaker of ice cold water from the machine and sat down in the receptionist's seat. I shut my eyes and relived the afternoon as I roamed the park looking for Marie. I had passed the French girl a couple of times and she was still sitting in her deckchair, long legs sprawled. I did not even know her name. I was meeting her later and did not know her name. Thinking we would be lovers that night, excited me so much that I resolved to go down the corridor and confront Marie. Then I heard a man's voice calling out and laughing. I crouched down under the reception desk. I waited for my wife's voice which was soft and indistinct. Then I heard the man leave. Was that the tall suntanned bloke I had seen her with in the park? For ten minutes, I waited then slowly got out from my hiding place.

Marie looked astonished. 'You!' she said. 'But I'm so glad you've just popped up.' She came towards me, her head slightly tilted to one side and with that winning smile of hers (that's how she coaxed so much dosh out of her backers and of course she was damn good at her job) and I realised how lucky I was to have such a sexy woman as a wife – narrow shoulders, sweet little waist, delicate little chin, mischievous eyes and the longest fingers I have ever seen on a woman and a voice that lilted straight into my heart. She put her hands on my shoulders and told me that she had returned from New York early owing to mishap at the factory and because she did not want to spoil my November fun, she had been staying at an hotel in Mayfair. 'We could go there later if you like?'

'I have an assignation!' I blurted out, far too bluntly.

Marie brought her hands down from my shoulders and went back behind her desk. I then told her about the French woman.

She did not want to spoil my November fun! If you do not quite hate me now, you will, you will soon enough. I was married to a saint. And what did I do? Had

dinner with the French girl and later, sex. And that was that. Sometimes my November affair's lasted for at least half-a-dozen magical *rendezvous's* and what I loved most were those first few platonic meetings, a sort of holding of breath before the big gasp out – that's a terrible description but my little French Miss was a failure and I was to blame. The truth was that I could not stop thinking about my wife.

Here I must tell you that a little detail that you might have missed or forgotten. Remember my telling of the non-existent film in which the man suddenly discovers his long last daughter… well, of course I'd made it up on the spot but there was a considerable element of truth in this. My first marriage was at eighteen and whereas Marie was all affable good nature… my *ex,* was not. (Cannot bring myself to even mention her name) I had known her as a young child – she was the daughter of my parent's friends and about three years older than me and when we visited, the girl always took me along to her 'Island' in the middle of the road. Suburbia in those days used to have these strange little islands of shrubbery and a few trees and I have no idea what was the point of them but they made good hiding places. There were two nasty boys next door whom she loved catapulting cherry pips at and when they once hit me on the forehead with a rotten potato she laid into them with such fury I thought the boys would die. She always defended me like a tiger with her cub. Her parents had a pianola in the living room and when they played Grieg's 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' she started dancing wildly round and round like some mad dervish as the music got faster and faster until she collapsed, foaming at the mouth. Once, when the grown ups had gone to the pub and left us alone she went into the back yard and told me to hold on tight to her cat, she then put some sort of muzzle over its face – the poor cat by this time knew what was coming and was struggling like mad. So I held on tight to the cat while she tied its tail around the handle, then taped the tail securely and holding the umbrella at arm's length started her wild dancing round and round. I can't remember what happened to the poor animal but she suddenly dropped to the ground, blood and foam coming out of her mouth.

I know why I married her. She was entertaining. I felt safe with her and I like people I've known all my life. She was like an attractive and dangerous sister.

On the last day of our honeymoon, we were drinking a beer at a cafe when the waiter came out and called the man at the next table to take a phone call inside. My wife said something like: 'Want a laugh?' and brought his glass over to our table and

started flicking her cigarette ash into his beer, then she spat into it. I did not want to make a scene there and then so I decided to wait until we returned to the hotel. In the meantime, the man came back and she gave the glass to him, smiling sweetly and told him: 'Hope you don't mind, but the wasps were buzzing around so…'

The poor man drunk it down with relish. She whispered something to him and they went off in his car.

About midnight, when she returned to the hotel, she said brightly: 'Is little didums shocked? Big bad lady having it away with gorgeous blokey on her honeymoon. Get used to it, darling.'

When I started to remonstrate she took off her shoe and pointing the heel at me, struck me hard across the face. I still have the scar.

And that was my life for the next three years. Occasionally I fought back but it gave me no pleasure. I could not understand how a girl who had guarded and protected me in childhood, could so change. But during that last terrible year, we had a daughter and to give my ex her due she never harmed the baby. Years later, I heard quite by accident that mother and daughter had opened a business selling a special herbal repellent (to deter unwanted stalkers of either sex). I laughed about it with one of my nicest November's and she said it was probably all a con. 'Perhaps, I should give you a spray,' she laughed. 'Keep you at bay!'

Where was I? Quite overcome for a moment by that heady memory. Ah, yes, about my daughter. She was named, Alyssa. Why a foreigner's name? My wife was at the time seeing a Moscow gangster who ran a porcelain business in London or so he said. It didn't last – the poor man broke his back on the ski slopes. My daughter? I can hear what you're thinking. My ex's only good point was that she never lied to me and she was adamant the baby was mine and conceived during one of those rare extraordinary week's when she behaved perfectly normally.

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Christmas has come and gone. I am more in love with Marie than I have ever been. I have vowed to give up my pathetic November's. Christmas also brought me an

unexpected present on the local news. How this cyclist, in trying to avoid a cat, rode straight into the path of a taxi. You've guessed it. My ex. What really surprised me was that she lived less than three tube stops away from our home. Hold on, there's someone at the door… a messenger from the Gods. A large envelope of photos and a rather badly written report.

> Dear Mr…..
>
> It has proven to be a difficult investigation. The photos are I am afraid not of the highest quality. You did tell me on no account to get too close to the subject. Your daughter is unmarried and works in an office in Camden although she is leaving soon. There is a boy friend, a tall lad with glasses who works as a steward in a gentleman's club. His name is Barney, believe it or not. On chatting to him in a local pub (I was discreet) he told me he wants to marry her but said she had sworn never to marry. After plying him with several vodkas he confessed that he wants to end the relationship especially as he has now met another girl…

I read slowly, savouring every new fact. Marie had been in Edinburgh for the week. Strangely my wife seemed not to be her normal ebullient self when she left. Perhaps she was more bereft than myself over the loss of November's. It was the day after Boxing Day when I blurted out: 'Marie? No more November's. I've decided to say goodbye to all that and be the hubby you deserve.'

Her reaction was surprisingly muted. 'I thought you enjoyed them? You mustn't give them up on my account.'

So… on this benign morning in early January, I began my new adventure. I had had long and sleepless nights wondering how I might approach her – my daughter, that is. I considered just going up to the little terrace house and ringing the bell. But what the hell would I say? Would she recognise me? There must be a few old photos of me or had my ex destroyed all sense of me. I have changed quite a bit in the last twenty or more years. Like less hair and no bushy 'tache. What a laugh! I could have

bumped into her when shopping or waiting for a bus. Then a totally disgusting thought went through my mind.

Had she ever been a possible *November?* Or worse, much worse, was she *actually* one of my twelve November's? Had I spoken to her on some pretext and thought… this pretty girl could be this year's 'Special One'. You see how I drove myself mad. I now felt quite resentful that Marie had disappeared up to Scotland when I needed her.

I studied the Private Eye's report for the umpteenth time. Gazed endlessly at the photos. I had to admit that my daughter was quite ordinary – not ugly or fat, just thin and rather plain. Panic over, I'm sure she would never have rated a 'November'. Suddenly, I jumped up shouting some nonsense or other – the upshot being: 'Azerbaijan! I'll go to the funeral!' Not as a mourner, because some old pal or crusty relative of the old dead ex might recognise me but as a sort of benign stalker. I would need patience and warm socks and a sizeable slug of Lindisfarne. I knew then that these next few weeks would be the most important in my whole sorry life. I got on to Terry my investigator and asked if there was a quick way to find out about my ex's funeral date.

He rang me back almost immediately. 'It's today at St Anne's,' he said and rang off. I don't think he liked me much. How would I approach Alyssa and tell her I was her dad. What a howl and a laugh! What was I playing at? I'd not given a damn about her before. Over the years, any normal father would have wondered about his daughter, like what sort of teenager she had become. And hello! There's my lovely Marie, working her socks off to keep us happy and secure and I suddenly have the urge to play the long lost father…

I ran upstairs and was sicker than I had ever been before.

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Two…

I watched the funeral from a distance. I shivered a bit and my stomach still felt raw. It had started to snow and crouching low behind a gravestone, I positioned my pocket video recorder. Luckily, the mourners did not make a meal of the proceedings, probably because they all wanted to get away before the weather got worse. I watched as Alyssa and another woman made their way out of the cemetery on foot. A car stopped presumably to offer them a lift and the other woman got in. I realised that my daughter only lived a couple of miles from the cemetery. She turned up the collar of her long black coat and started briskly walking down the High Street. By the time, I had retrieved my car, she was nowhere to be seen. I drove slowly and then saw her, leaning against a shop window, her hands cupping her face. I could hear her sobs even with the car window down. What should I do? Here of all places, outside a dowdy men's outfitters, out of some past era where I sometimes treated myself to the odd pullover. The poor girl was now almost doubled up. It was difficult to believe that she had loved the dead ex that much. I felt embarrassed. I should not be here at all and should not be witnessing this creature's distress and could have straight away driven on and my life with Marie would have jogged along in its lovely easeful way.

But I didn't.

I wound down the window and called out: 'Are you OK? Should I call a doctor?'

She was now clawing wildly at the shop front window, like in those horror films when some monstrous plague is haemorrhaging the person's lungs and they've been locked away to stop the plague spreading. After my lame beginning, I went on: 'I've never seen snow in the High Street before. Come to think of it, the place's deserted. Makes a nice change.'

I got out of the car and I don't know what made me do it. What makes people do things that are crazy? I ran up behind her and squeezed her waist. Almost immediately, I jumped back shocked at my action. The poor girl gradually stopped her clawing. I pulled her around quite roughly and kissed her hard on the mouth. Her lips were freezing but the rest of her face was warm as I covered it with kisses. I took a step back even more shocked at my behaviour. She seemed taller and more elegant

than in the awful photographs. And I have this thing about winter coats. Women are so bloody alluring in them. If I were a woman I would wear them even in the Summer. I was now avoiding looking at her and gazed intently at some old fashioned sports jackets and a rather natty umbrella. She moved past me and out of sight. I didn't turn round. During this whole session of madness, my daughter had not said a word.

Marie came back home rather out of sorts. People just weren't buying 'Bistro Dogs'. Sales had dropped off disastrously. For the first time ever, when I pounced on her in the kitchen, she pushed me gently away. 'How are we going to manage?' Tears were welling up and her pretty face was all screwed up.

'Perhaps the old doggy nosh is getting a wee bit boring and needs spicing up? Mice love aniseed but I'm not sure what…'

'Have you anything constructive to say?' my wife muttered, coldly.

'Start up another Company,' I suggested. 'If dogs no longer hack it, let's see what cats can do? I once read about a cat that loved "human gravy".'

'What the fuck's 'human gravy'? No, I shouldn't ask. I ought to know better.' Marie mumbled as we left the kitchen.

'Or we could start by pushing a new pet. After all cats, dogs, hamsters, snakes, macaws, bunnies and leopards… they've all had their day. The trick is to get people interested in some rare, out of the way, pet.'

'Like dinosaurs?' Marie said, without a smile. 'I just get the brand up to speed and the bloody things go extinct.'

She seemed drained of her normal graceful outlook on life.

'What about worms?' I asked. 'I'm sure we could all learn to love worms.'

'I'm going to bed!'

"'Give your favourite worms a real wiggle today and go buy fabulous *Earthy Smelly!* You know your worms will love it! Three for two at your favourite supermarket!' I shouted up after her.

Marie screamed. For the first time in our married life Marie had lost her cool.

I stayed downstairs for a bit, poured myself a glass of Lindisfarne – I find the stuff very relaxing and went over things in my mind. Why did Alyssa not say anything, or scream or slap my face? Perhaps she was not grieving for bitch deceased at all but for… the boyfriend? No, that wouldn't bring her to tears. What would I know, besides the poor sod was called: 'Barney'.

Marie was slamming doors and generally making a lot of noise upstairs so I settled down for a long night in the armchair. I began to think about my visit to the cemetery. Alyssa's tears and misery could have been the result of some other problem. A mystery that needed to be solved. About four in the morning I woke up and washed my face under the kitchen tap and made myself a cup of tea. I realised that I enjoyed this feeling of separation, with Marie upstairs in our bed alone. I would go up later and who knows what pleasure I might find… The dream came back. I was in a forest and there was a sort of crossroads of pathways and I knew that Alyssa who had been running away from me had taken one of the pathways. I stood smoking a cigarette trying to decide which way to go when the French girl appeared. I asked her if she'd seen my daughter and she said something annoying like I don't even see myself. We had a friendly chat and she said she'd returned to work and how exciting it would be if I came in and hid in the Gents and she would crouch down under the counter and the security staff would lock up and we'd be all alone in the store for the whole night. I did not much like myself in this dream because I said: 'I'm only interested in my daughter and I don't want sex with you at all.'

Then I woke up. Over my cup of tea I thought – that's the answer. Eureka! Alyssa would never be suspicious of another girl. I would get my French girl to befriend her… What a stroke of genius.

Marie was standing behind me and I could feel the cold knife against my throat. Was this it? Had my wife suddenly gone mad? 'I hate you,' she said quietly. 'I hate you to infinity. I will make you suffer.'

Then my wife's mobile phone rang and woke me. She normally takes it upstairs with her - a bone of contention between us. It was seven in the morning.

'Marie?' a man's voice stuttered. 'Marie, are you there?'

'Yes, it's me.' I did a passable imitation of my wife's sleepy voice. At school, I had been an excellent mimic of the teachers. 'Is everything alright?

'I miss you.'

'Why did you wake me?'

So as Marie, I held a remarkable conversation with this idiot who was called Markie, Jamie, Normie, Charlie... who the hell knows! The upshot was that I made an assignation with him (as Marie) at a bar at the top of Dean Street.

When he had rung off, I felt incredibly buoyed up. A master plan of considerable deviousness was formulating in my head. Maybe, luck which had never been part of my life had now decided to give me its full bounty. Didn't I just I feel alive? Bursting with the blood gutting stuff! Upstairs I could hear Marie getting ready for work. I started preparing our usual breakfast. Tomato juice with a squeeze of lime followed by scrambled eggs and white and brown toast.

Marie would often say to me: 'Babykins, no one goes to work with such a good breakfast inside them as I do. You should be at our early morning meetings, all those starving girls with bad breath, popping peppermints.'

'Do you tell them about your breakfasts?'

'Of course, not! My usual line is to say something like: 'What a rush, darling! I had my usual herb tea and a half pot of yoghurt.' Of course, I don't tell them I've got this dear sweetie husband who looks after me, body and soul.

'Soul?' I queried, somewhat alarmed.

She thought carefully for a moment. 'Yes, you do look after my spiritual needs especially when I'm wearing like my fuschia silk shirt…

After that my hands were all over her. I had a particular fondness for being completely stark bollock naked while she wore any of her fashionable outfits but my extra special favourite was her blue wrap dress. How I loved the buckle rubbing against my skin. I can't count the mornings when she would say things like: 'Babykins, You must not! You simply must not! I've got a contract to sign and I can't be late.' Or 'Hey Nonny! No! No! I shall have to change my skirt.'

Well, that sort of thing has not happened much lately. Well, years really.

Marie appeared wearing a grey, pleated belted dress. I won't say she didn't look good in it, but a bit, a tiny bit, Auntie like – not cutting edge, ball-breaking: 'Don't I look hot in this pencil skirt and silk shirt, gentlemen and not one of you can have me!'

'Are you going to the publishers today?' Marie interrupted my train of thought.

'The appointment's next week.'

Then she was gone. Without a peck or a smile or an exasperated shrug or the lovely command of bygone days: 'Walk me to the station, will you, babykins? Do it for England!' And we would laugh and when I kissed her at the tube entrance she would always look startled and say: 'What if I suddenly fall out of love with you?' And I would look quite devastated and she would whisper in my ear. 'Well, I don't intend to do it today, or next week or this whole year coming but after that I can't promise…' And I would kiss her softly on the lips and whisper back: 'What more could I want than a whole year of you.'

Don't cringe! You see this sort of nonsense glued us together. So here I was now sitting at me old iPaddy drafting out the salient points of a plan. I needed to get the details down. If I forgot one detail the whole edifice might come crumbling down. When I'd finished, I saved the file to an innocuous name, prefaced it with ten pages of boring stuff about e-books and got ready for my date. I had just put on my one and only suit when the doorbell rang.

It was a bloke. I must say he looked absolutely shocked. He eventually summoned the words: 'Have I come to the right address… I'm Charlie.'

'Charlie?' I queried, as surprised as he was but I didn't show it. 'Charlie, you say?'

'And you must be Mr Derringpole.'

'I usually am.'

'I'm a colleague you see of your wife….'

'Right… don't think she's ever mentioned a Charlie.'

'I've come to collect some dog photos.'

'Why on earth would you want to do that?' I must say I was enjoying his discomfiture.

'You see I work with your wife, well in the next door building to be exact…'

'You've already told me that. Anyhow, do come in.'

The poor man looked very uncomfortable so I suggested a cup of coffee. 'And while you're in my wife's office do take care, she screams blue murder if anyone disturbs her stuff. So old chap, find the doggies and then come down and join me for coffee.

He spent about ten minutes upstairs and I began to wonder if he was up to something well… rather juvenile. When he came downstairs the poor man was so confused that I had a moment of real male solidarity and I owned up and confessed my subterfuge. He surprised me then because he said with a bit of a laugh: 'You were damn good. I wonder you don't make a living out of it. Your voice was so sexy but I suppose you'd just got up?'

‘You woke me! Look Charlie, I have a few rather urgent things to do but why don’t we meet up as planned in that bar and I promise you… you won’t regret it. And you can relax, I don’t play jealous husband’s. I’ve got a suggestion that I think you will like and will suit us all.’

‘But what I don’t understand…’

‘Spare me! I would very much like to know how after I made this assignation with you for a bar in Dean Street you came round here? But it can wait. We’ll talk later, and I hope, as they say, all will be revealed. But on no account mention any of this to Marie.’

He started to remonstrate and I shut him up quick. ‘Look soldier, I’m practically giving Marie to you on a plate so don’t blow it with any liberal ideas of truth. She would not tell you the truth. Women with their many great qualities do not possess in the slightest degree, the notion of fairness. They read our letters, search our wallets, open our diaries, find out our passwords… and this is when they’re *not* suspicious!’

After he’d gone I scuttled up to Marie’s room but everything seemed hunky so I got down to the real business and rang Terry. ‘Can you for your usual hefty bloody fee do some more work for me? Get the low down on someone who works with my wife? I gave him all the details I knew and told him I wanted this information within the hour. ‘Also, I met a French girl who used to work in…’ And so on. The details need not concern us right now.

What I remember most about my first meeting with ‘Charlie’ was the rather tasty Indian we had later. Anyhow, we ate our curries outside, there were four or five small tables and almost opposite, a couple of centuries of London fogs had smoke-grimed a Georgian terrace house which had some beautiful flower boxes on each window sill. ‘Do you come here with Marie? I asked. ‘I mean she might just turn up and then the cat would be amongst…’

‘She’s gone to the City and won’t be back until late. Meeting some important backers but we don’t hold out much…’

‘We? Are you *that* cuddly-wuddly with my wife? Are you supporting the business financially?’

‘Just the management team of which I’m…’

This time, I really was rude. ‘You are trying to take my wife away from me. You’ve made a liar out of her. You were going to come to my home and crawl into our bed with her!’

‘Shut up,’ he said softly. ‘People are looking. I don’t know everyone in the building and for all you know an employee might be listening to us right now.’

‘Sorry, soldier. Sorry about that outburst. Perhaps I’m not as indifferent as I pretend. I have this air of knowing all the answers.’

‘No, you don’t. Marie told me you were still in love with her. This makes her unhappy as she still has some residual affection for you. Everything you do or say tells me that you love her. You’re a long way from cool, matey.’

What a body blow! Residual!!! How had this arsehole wiggled and wangled himself into my Marie’s affections.

This is what I told him: ‘If you do something for me, I will not stand in the way of you and my wife. I mean, I expect you to behave discretely. Whatever Marie decides, you or me or some funny old Canadian Mountie, I’ll go along with it.’ Laughing: ‘Between ourselves, I think they look rather ridiculous with those funny breeches and vulgar red tunic. Don’t look so worried, it’s just a fantasy of mine because she spends so much time in Canada…’

‘Canada? She works damned hard over there and I find it insulting that you…’

‘Listen, soldier, you don’t own her yet so spare me the ‘PC’ defence.’

Then a woman walked past us going in the direction of Wardour Street. ‘Charlie,’ I said, quietly: ‘You mustn’t mind me but that woman with the sunglasses and cream coat with the rose in the lapel, she’s something eh?’

He smiled and called to the waiter for a couple more beers. I felt he genuinely liked me. A rare thing in my life indeed.

Over coffee, he said: 'When I rang Marie… you… you said the magic words.'

'What would that have been?' I asked, intrigued.

'Dean Street.'

'I said that?'

'Our code. This meant that I was not to meet her for lunch but the opposite… that *you* were in the room but would be going out soon so… I want you to come over. It was something we arranged months ago.'

'Bugger me! Months ago?'

'Sorry.'

We were now strolling towards his office. 'Does Marigold know about this affair?'

He looked really shaken. 'How do you know about Marigold? For God's sake! Don't say anything. I mean, Marie… and the whole office thinks I'm single.'

'Takes one to know one old chap.'

'You were going to ask a favour of me?'

I glanced at my watch. 'Can it wait. Got an appointment with my publishers so must dash. I think we've made progress… Charles. Let's have another Indian say, for the sorting out of nitty gritty, what about on Friday? Better not make it the place with the emerald shutters again. A bit too close to the jolly old office. I'll ring.'

I walked randomly about Soho, trying to piece together the jigsaw puzzle that I was constructing. But ever since I'd seen that sexy woman outside the restaurant, I'd

been thinking about my daughter. Before, my chicanery had temporarily put Alyssa out of my mind. I now realised that she was almost beautiful. I also knew that I had still not seen her as a real person. I longed to be with her again and slowly discover her past. I wanted to see that first smile or that first flash of anger at something I might say. If one gives enough total attention to someone or something that goal will always be accomplished. Our ability to use attention is a gift from the Gods. However, there is an important proviso: that one's attention must be full of joy. Without grace and joy all you have is concentration and focus. Sadly, I realised that with Alyssa I did not yet have the requisite joy only need and curiosity.

I had strolled into a large Regent Street store and stood around for a couple of minutes watching the customers coming and going. It had been a long time since I had felt so excited. I took the plunge and asked one of the assistants: 'I want to buy a winter coat for my wife?'

I ended up, not with a coat (I wanted to get away from black but the few other colours were dowdy and uninteresting) so I settled for a beautiful red jacket with an unusual design. To quote the shop assistant's patter: 'Sir, your wife will adore this! See how the pleated peplum works so beautifully here and don't the asymmetric button fastenings give it a chicly feminine shape and silhouette.'

'Well, I'm all for anything chicly feminine!' I laughed. 'And I suppose I should buy a skirt to go with it?'

'I'm sure your wife will have something to match but it wouldn't do any harm to complete the outfit.'

How I drifted about London that day. I was shaken by what Charlie had told me, there's no denying that. Scoring our lunchtime meeting, I had to admit that he had won. Narrowly, on points. He can beat me each round on points, I thought, but eventually I'll knock the bugger out and win.

Anyhow let's free my mind of these imperfect male bragadacios and watch my daughter open her present. I felt a perverse pleasure in walking down Dean Street carrying the stuff of my dreams. Dear, narrow, litter strewn, smelly old Dean Street, perhaps the grottiest little highway in the whole of the West End but how I loved it,

especially all the little turnings and passageways off it. Of course, I would have to get to know Alyssa first before I gave her the gift.

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Three…

Marie came home looking miserable but at least she did not seem to blame me anymore for the trials and tribs of 'Bistro Dogs'. I had rustled up some kidneys in wine with a side dish of grilled tomatoes and garlic. Some rather nice bread I'd picked up in Old Compton Street and opening a bottle of our favourite rose, *Pelure d'Oignon* we did indeed make it a light but tasty meal. At one point, I asked how it went in the City today. Hell! As soon as I asked I knew it was a terrible mistake but Marie did not ask how I knew about the visit but just shrugged: 'Predictable'.

I was getting used to her dowdy grey dress and allied to the fact that my last sex was with the starving Mademoiselle and that was three days ago, I was up for it. But first we had a discussion about Henry James. In our earlier years together we had read to each other regularly, I would read a chapter then Marie would do the same. We had been fascinated by the sheer brilliant use of intelligence in 'The Sacred Fount' but had at about halfway, declared it unreadable. We tried every year and always got a bit further along that tortuous path but inevitably had to admit defeat. Our favourite read was Hamsun's 'Mysteries' and we argued endlessly about the motivations of the characters. I asked why she had brought up Henry James again after all these years but she just shrugged and popped a mint into her mouth. Was she hinting that we might, just one day finish, and make sense, as it were, of that amazing novella or was she telling me that it was now a past dream?

'Why don't we read to each other again, like the old days?' was my suggestion as we washed up. Marie did one of her delightful screwed up faces. 'Methinks this lady is way too tired.' I ventured a hand on her shoulder and rather clumsily kissed her sweet delicate chin. She burst into tears.

'Marie, Marie…' I led her back into the living room and undid her apron. 'Look rest on the sofa and put your feet up.' I rearranged the cushions and then went into the bathroom to wet her flannel. I knelt beside her and gently wiped her face. 'You must rest and… if you like, I'll put the cat out tonight.' She did a quick little smile because of course, we had no cat. 'Maybe, a film on TV,' I suggested.

'I just want to be with you,' she said, holding my hand, 'and that box of chocolates on the sideboard.'

About ten minutes later, she was asleep. I sat in the armchair opposite and saw that she had aged without my noticing. I saw a woman whose whole world was about to collapse around her. All she had strived and worked for over the years and the wonderful and humorous way she had put up with my oddities had been to no avail. I realised then what she knew – that she could not start again. Not with a new job, not with me and not with a lover. There are people who suddenly come to a stop. There are those who can't begin again. I loved Marie to the depths of my being but against Alyssa there was no contest. Love was not enough. Love is about leaving oneself behind. My daughter had suddenly become my life. The brief moment I was with her had changed my soul.

In the middle of the night, I woke and found my wife nudging me. 'Come on, I think we should go to bed.' We undressed and got into a rather chilly bed.

The distant rumble of thunder woke me at about nine. I had not slept so well for a long time. Marie had already left. Her cornflake bowl was in the sink and the remains of a fried egg. She had left a note: 'I must really learn how to cook. Maybe we could go to a restaurant tonight and have a good talk. Phone me about four. Babykins, last night our chilly love making was – well, just… hot.'

As you can imagine this note left me with more questions than answers. Terry rang. He relayed a strange piece of information. That he had followed the Mademoiselle yesterday and then lost her. He sounded very grumpy and told me that this had only happened once before. I eventually got the details out of him. While he was droning away, I suddenly had a thought. My camcorder! I had forgotten that I recorded some of the funeral and had not yet looked at it. I made some excuse to Terry and whizzed upstairs – the little darling was still in my overcoat pocket. I was overwhelmed with excitement. In fact, I needed a strong cup of coffee to calm me down. But at exactly 10.08 am I drew the living room curtains, took the phone of the hook and connected up to the TV.

At first, I was disappointed. The grey light and flakes of snow made for an unclear picture. It was strange seeing it all again. Before my conversion, so to speak. Now, in the warmth, I started to notice details. Like the friend Alyssa had left the cemetery with, was seemingly more overcome by the proceedings than her. Then I

saw a face staring straight at me. This person was observing the funeral like myself, from about the same distance away on the other side. She wore a sort of yellowy bobble hat. I went back to concentrating on the proceedings. Something I had blotted out. How could I have forgotten? What had happened when they lowered the body. That my dead ex would suddenly push up the coffin lid, crawl out and on all fours run like some rabid and crazed dog towards me and when she got close to me screaming out that she had made them bury her with a toasting fork! Then she produced a dead cat out of her hair and flung it in my face.

I didn't make it to the kitchen. I vomited over the carpet and lay curled up, tears running down my face and sobs racking my body. It had been years since I had cried like this. In fact, I doubted that I had ever let go like this. Then I told myself sternly: 'Get up wanker and get on with your life. Oxygenate!' But it felt like I was enclosed in some sticky substance that gave and stretched a little but more or less immobilized me. I would be like this until Marie got home. I glanced up at the TV and realized that I kept seeing over and over again the moment when the coffin was lowered into the ground.

Slept, I think, for a couple of hours. Once, the telephone had rung. It was getting to the time when I should phone Marie about our meal out. The thunderstorm was returning and it had got very dark. The video had at last turned itself off. How the thought came into my head, I don't know, but a brilliant way of seeing my daughter again that would seem perfectly natural. I would go to her tube stop around the time she would catch the train for her office in Camden. Let's say eight thirty? If it did not work out then I would get Terry on the job. Daughter's certainly cost money and Terry was not cheap.

In recollection, I can hardly remember the rest of the day but I think I recovered before Marie came home and it was silly to think I had been sick at all. There was no awful smell or vomit on the carpet. I've have a feeling that we went to a Fulham Road bistro but you see I've blotted out so much. So if I flit between past and present… well that's just the way it is…

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Four…

Parson's Green station is dirty, draughty and noisy. All the more ghastly for being situated in a rather pleasant bit of late Victorian suburbia and cosy modernism. So here I was on a bitter winter morning staring at commuters swaddled up in coats and scarves. I stood under the bridge and waited. A few desultory flakes of snow appeared. Half an hour passed and I was freezing to death. I mean it, my feet were almost numb and I was constantly shivering; not to mention, extremely irritated by the bloody pigeons flapping about above my head. Desperately trying to resist the temptation to pop into the Cafe opposite where I would possibly still have a reasonable view of the proceedings. I considered: what would I do if my daughter suddenly appeared? Well, answer, probably nothing today. Especially as I could hardly speak or think with the cold. Then a young woman dressed in a white, sleeveless summery dress stopped under the bridge and stood quite close to me. Even more surprising was that she took out a newspaper and started reading it. She showed absolutely no concern at all for the freezing conditions. I concluded that she must be mad.

'You're brave!' I said.

She did not look up from her newspaper.

After another five minutes of waiting and I was now stamping my feet up and down non-stop when she suddenly turned to me and asked: 'Are you waiting for someone? It's nicer opposite in the warm.'

'You're right. I'll give it another five.'

'Is she worth waiting for?'

I just laughed and kicked out at a pigeon trying to peck at my shoes.

'Can't stand them either!' she smiled. 'Some poor clown in a Shakespeare play was hanged for bringing them as a gift. They're nothing but trouble.'

I had no idea what she was talking about but she was not mad. Just on the game. I thought: I've never been with a prostitute and said aloud: 'Is the summery bare arm get up, part of your…'

Alyssa walked past. She almost brushed against me and then she was gone. There was a train arriving and commuters were jostling and pushing each other through the narrow entrance. It had all happened so quickly. Had she seen me? She had not turned her head towards me of that I was sure. Anyhow, why should she remember the strange man who had grabbed her a few weeks back. I replayed those few crazy moments outside the men's outfitters. I was sure that Alyssa had not even looked at me then so how on earth could she recognise me! There was a lot I had got wrong and I needed to be more disciplined in my adventure. Me? After all, I'd never actually seen her properly either. I felt really disgusted at my ineptitude.

'You coming over the road?' the woman asked.

'Why not,' I answered, scarcely able to move one leg in front of the other. 'But did you see that young woman who just walked past?'

She shook her head negatively and we entered what was really quite a smart restaurant.

The waiter took my coat and called the woman Constance. We sat by the window and ordered. She, smoked salmon and an omelette. Myself, I couldn't resist the Full English. It was only ten past nine.

'I charge one fifty for half a night.'

This was after I took my first bite of an extremely succulent banger.

'But you can pay in instalments if you like.'

Constance had her back to the window and was sitting under a sort of replica oil lamp and as the weather had deteriorated and got quite dark, the lamps had been turned on giving her an extraordinary cavernous look. Her eyes were the deepest set I had ever seen, her blonde hair straggly but attractive. She appeared under this strange light to look like some starved prisoner.

'I allow a little bit of torture if that pleases you.'

All I had done was smile at these suggestions. In strange situations I have always found it better not to talk. But hell, I was enjoying my breakfast. I mentioned at some point that it was snowing hard now. The waiter drew a curtain around us – a bit like when in a hospital bed and lit her cigarette. He nodded to me. 'We allow. Just this once –ten minutes.'

Constance leant across the table and kissed me lightly. 'The instalments bit was just a joke. My, my, you've got quite a glow after the cold.' She sighed and settled back in her seat. 'I love men with clean cut faces. I bet you've been spoilt.'

I smiled again and hated myself for it. Then over our third cup of coffee, I began to tell her my story. At one point, we got up and told the waiter we would be back again in twenty minutes but were going out for a bit of air.

'Wow!'

She said as I threaded her arms through my overcoat and wrapped my scarf around her neck.

'Poor you,' she whispered as we walked aimlessly up and down pretty little side streets. Whatever point I got to in my story, she would come out with: 'Poor you!' and squeezed my arm. I wasn't in the least cold and a bit of sun came out and shone on the wet pavements. Passing a church, she stopped abruptly. 'Let's go inside for a second. And I *don't* like this Charlie! He's an evil bastard.'

Some parishioners were serving hot food to a few down and outs. We sat in the pews and I finished my story with seeing Alyssa under the bridge.

'You get yourself about, don't you? I think I did see a woman, this Alyssa of yours but there was nothing special about her. There was one thing though… she had this comb in her hair. Like Spanish girls do or used to… Sorry.'

'You mean those tall combs that stick up from the back of the head?'

‘They’re ugly… and this comb was quite small - a sort of flower. White, I think. Remember, I wasn’t really looking. My attention was all on you.’

I put my hand on her thigh. Poor Constance almost jumped out of her seat.

‘Steady sailor. I know you’ve been at sea a long time but… there are certain preliminaries.’

‘Like what?’ I asked.

‘Like, not now!’

She jumped up and ran out of the church. I stayed musing over events. There was a soothing mumbling of voices in the background.

‘Do you any want help, Sir?’

A middle aged woman looked at me with a kindly face.

‘She just walked out on me,’ I said. ‘We were getting on pretty well and then…’

‘What I meant, Sir, was that you don’t look very well. It’s cold enough, today. We’ve got plenty of hot soup here and you’re welcome.’

‘Thanks but I’ve just had a very decent breakfast…’ Suddenly the thought of my ‘Full English’ brought a horrible wave of nausea. I doubled up and was sick into my hands. ‘It’s alright,’ I gasped, ‘nothing happens. I don’t actually vomit.’

They took me into another room and sat me in a large armchair. The vicar asked if I had been ill like this before. When I said yes, about a dozen times, I didn’t care for the look they gave one other.

The vicar, a fat oily looking bloke, lowered his voice. ‘You told my colleague here that the woman you were with, ran off.’

‘Yes, and she’s got my bloody overcoat!’ I shouted.

They told me to rest and they would be back after cleaning and tidying up after the 'needies'. 'We might be able to find an old pullover for you but you stay here for now and we'll be back with a nice cup of tea in twenty minutes.

I felt in my pocket. Not enough money for a taxi. I had not an ounce of energy left in my body. I doubted that I could even walk out of the church. Nothing for it but to phone Marie. But why should I be in a hurry to do anything. The church was very peaceful. The gentle clatter of clearing up and moving furniture about lulled me wonderfully.

I had dreams. I had murderous dreams. I had my ex tell me that she would haunt me for ever. In the dream she said: 'Down the highways and byways of life I shall break your spirit and in death I'll cinder your heart again and again!' Marie was there momentarily showing me the new brand and slogan: 'Drink with the Dinosaurs'. Then a sort of peace. I actually dreamt peace and it had a colour that I had never seen before. Gradually, I heard the vicar and a woman talking. But I could not be bothered opening my eyes. They came nearer. 'We let him rest.' the woman, whispered. Another female voice: 'I've been silly. We had a row about nothing so I'm here to take him home.' Then the vicar said that they should wake me. 'Listen, my dear, you can take your husband home but he should see a doctor. He has this strange idea that when he's sick…'

'That nothing happens? Yes, he's believed that for a long time.'

I decided to open my eyes. I must say the vicar looked pleased. Everyone looked pleased. The kindly lady who first helped me said quietly that her day had been made. My wife slowly led me out of the church. As we were in the porch, she turned to the vicar and said that she hoped he would not be offended but could she contribute something to their 'goodworks' and gave him a twenty pound note.

It was a short walk to her flat and she let me lie on her sofa. 'I shall phone your wife… your real wife, if that's alright…'

'Why not… you'll find a little address book in my coat.'

‘I already have,’ she whispered, ruffling my hair. ‘You’re amazing. One moment you look at death’s door and the next like now… you’re back to the bloke I fancied in the restaurant. Don’t mind me. I’m a bit crazy like you.’

It was late when Marie appeared. She was all smiles and when Constance suggested that could she offer her some cheese on toast they disappeared into the kitchen chatting away like long lost friends. They were gone a long time.

‘A man with two wives…’ I said, when they returned, ‘is double the man.’

‘When he goes all silly cryptic, it means he’s mending,’ Marie informed Constance.

A taxi drew up and we got in.

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