THE LAST LETTER FROM YOUR LOVER
Jojo Moyes
To Charles, who started it all with a paper message

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Happy Birthday! Enclosed is your birthday present which I hope you like . . .
I am thinking of you especially today . . . because I have decided that although I
love you I am not in love with you. I don’t feel that you are God’s One for me.
Anyway, I really hope that you like your present and that you have a fantastic
birthday.

Female to Male, via letter

Prologue

Later x
Ellie Haworth spies her friends through the throng and weaves her way through the
bar. She drops her bag at her feet and places her phone on the table in front of them.
They are already well lubricated – it’s in the tenor of their voices, the extravagant arm
movements and loud laughter, the empty bottles between them.
‘Late.’ Nicky holds up her watch, wagging a finger at her. ‘Don’t tell us. “I had a
story I had to finish.”’
‘Interview with wronged MP’s wife. Sorry. It was for tomorrow’s edition,’ she says,
sliding into the empty seat and pouring herself a glass from the dregs of a bottle. She
pushes her phone across the table. ‘Okay. Tonight’s annoying word for discussion:
“later”.’
‘Later?’
‘As a sign-off. Does that mean tomorrow or later today? Or is it just some horrible
teenage affection that actually means nothing at all?’
Nicky peels at the glowing screen. ‘It’s “later” plus an “X”. That’s like “goodnight”.
I’d say tomorrow.’
‘Definitely tomorrow,’ says Corinne. ““Later” is always tomorrow.’ She pauses. ‘Or
it could even mean the day after.’
‘It’s very casual.’
‘Casual?’
‘As in something you might say to the postman.’
‘You’d send a kiss to your postman?’
Nicky grins. ‘I might. He’s gorgeous.’

Corinne studies the message. ‘I don’t think that’s fair. It could just mean he was in a hurry to do something else.’

‘Yeah. Like his wife.’

Ellie shoots a warning look at Douglas.

‘What?’ he says. ‘I’m just saying, don’t you think you’re past the point where you should be deciphering text-speak?’

Ellie gulps her wine, then leans forward over the table. ‘Okay. I need another drink if I’m about to get the lecture.’

‘If you’re intimate enough with someone to have sex in their office, I think you should be able to ask them to clarify when you might be meeting them for coffee.’

‘What does the rest of the message say? And please tell me it’s nothing about sex in his office.’

Ellie peers at her phone, scrolling down the messages. ‘“Tricky calling from home. Dublin next week but not sure yet what plans are. Later x.”’

‘He’s keeping his options open,’ Douglas says.

‘Unless he’s . . . you know . . . not sure what his plans are.’

‘Then he would have said, “Will call from Dublin.” Or even “I’ll fly you out to Dublin.”’

‘Is he taking his wife?’

‘He never does. It’s a work trip.’

‘Perhaps he’s taking someone else,’ Douglas murmurs, into his beer.

Nicky shakes her head meditatively. ‘God, wasn’t life easier when they had to ring you and speak to you? Then you could at least gauge rejection from the sound of their voice.’

‘Yes.’ Corinne snorts. ‘And you could sit at home by the phone for hours waiting for them to call.’

‘Oh, the nights I spent –’

‘– Checking the dial tone was working –’

‘– and then slamming down the phone just in case that had been the exact minute they rang.’

Ellie hears them laugh, acknowledging the truth in their humour, some small part of her still waiting to see the little screen illuminate suddenly with a call. A call that, given the hour and that things are ‘tricky at home’, isn’t going to happen.

Douglas walks her home. He is the only one of the four of them living with a partner, but Lena, his girlfriend, is big in technology PR and often at her office until ten or eleven at night. Lena doesn’t mind him coming out with his old friends – she has accompanied him a few times but it’s hard for her to penetrate the wall of old jokes and knowing references that come with a decade and a half of friendship; most of the time she lets him come alone.
‘So, what’s going on with you, big boy?’ Ellie nudges him as they skirt a shopping trolley that someone has left on the pavement. ‘You didn’t say anything about yourself back there. Unless I missed it all.’

‘Not much,’ he says, and hesitates. He shoves his hands into his pockets. ‘Actually, that’s not quite true. Um . . . Lena wants to have a baby.’

Ellie looks up at him. ‘Wow.’

‘And I do too,’ he adds hastily. ‘We’ve been talking about it for ages, but we’ve decided now that there’s never going to be a right time so we might as well get on with it.’

‘You old romantic.’

‘I’m . . . I dunno . . . quite happy about it, really. Lena’s going to keep her job, and I’ll look after the baby at home. You know, provided everything happens as it should and . . .’

Ellie tries to keep her voice neutral. ‘And that’s what you want?’

‘Yeah. I don’t like my job anyway. Haven’t done for years. She earns a fortune. I think it’ll be quite nice pottering round with a kid all day.’

‘Parenthood’s a bit more than pottering round—’ she begins.

‘I know that. Mind out . . . on the pavement.’ Gently he steers her round the mess. ‘But I’m ready for it. I don’t need to be out every night in the pub. I want the next stage. That’s not to say I don’t like coming out with you guys, but sometimes I do wonder whether we shouldn’t all be . . . you know . . . growing up a bit.’

‘Oh, no!’ Ellie clasps his arm. ‘You’ve crossed over to the dark side.’

‘Well, I don’t feel the same way about my job as you do. For you it’s everything, right?’

‘Almost everything,’ she concedes.

They walk on in silence for a couple of streets, listening to the distant sirens, the slammed car doors and muffled arguments of the city. Ellie loves this part of the evening, buoyed by friendship, temporarily free of the uncertainties that surround the rest of her life. She’s had a good night at the pub, is headed home to her cosy flat. She’s healthy. She has a credit card with plenty of unused capacity, plans for the weekend, and she’s the only one of her friends not yet to have found a single grey hair. Life is good.

‘Do you ever think about her?’ Douglas asks.

‘Who?’

‘John’s wife. Do you think she knows?’

The mention of her dissipates Ellie’s happiness. ‘I don’t know.’ And when Douglas says nothing, she adds, ‘I’m sure I would, if I were her. He says she’s more interested in the children than him. Sometimes I tell myself there might even be some little part of her that’s glad she’s not having to worry about him. You know, about keeping him happy.’

‘Now that is wishful thinking.’
‘Maybe. But if I’m really honest, the answer’s no. I don’t think about her and I don’t feel guilty. Because I don’t think it wouldn’t have happened if they’d been happy or . . . you know . . . connected.’

‘You women have such a misguided view of men.’
‘You think he’s happy with her?’ She studies his face.
‘I have no idea if he is or not. I just don’t think he needs to be unhappy with his wife to be sleeping with you.’

The mood has shifted slightly, and perhaps in recognition of this, she lets go of his arm, adjusting her scarf around her neck. ‘You think I’m a bad person. Or he’s a bad person.’

It’s out there. The fact that it has come from Douglas, the least judgemental of her friends, stings.

‘I don’t think anyone’s a bad person. I just think of Lena, and what it would mean for her to carry my child, and the idea of dicking around on her just because she chose to give my baby the attention I felt was mine . . .’

‘So you do think he’s a bad person.’

Douglas shakes his head. ‘I just . . .’ He stops, looks up into the night sky before framing his answer. ‘I think you should be careful, Ellie. All this trying to decipher what he means, what he wants, it’s just bullshit. You’re wasting your time. In my book things are generally pretty simple. Someone likes you, you like them, you hook up, and that’s pretty much it.’

‘Nice universe you live in, Doug. Shame it doesn’t resemble the real one.’

‘Okay, let’s change the subject. Bad one to bring up on a few drinks.’

‘No.’ Her voice sharpens. ‘In vino veritas and all that. It’s fine. At least I know how you feel. I’ll be fine from here. Say hi to Lena for me.’ She runs the last two streets to her house, not turning back to view the old friend behind her.

The Nation is being packed up, box by box, for transfer to its new glass-fronted home on a gleaming, reclaimed quay to the east of the city. The office, week by week, has been thinning: where once there were towers of press releases, files and archived cuttings, now empty desks, unexpected shiny lengths of laminated surface, are exposed to the harsh glare of the strip lighting. Souvenirs of past stories have been unearthed, like prizes from an archaeologist’s dig, flags from royal jubilees, dented metal helmets from distant wars and framed certificates for long-forgotten awards.

Banks of cables lie exposed, carpet tiles have been dislodged and great holes opened in the ceilings, prompting histrionic visits from health and safety experts and endless visitors with clipboards. Advertising, Classified and Sport have already moved to Compass Quay. The Saturday magazine, Business and Personal Finance are preparing to transfer in the next weeks. Features, Ellie’s department, will follow along with News, moving in a carefully choreographed sleight-of-hand so that while Saturday’s newspaper will emanate from the old Turner Street offices, Monday’s will spring, as if by magic, from the new address.
The building, home to the newspaper for almost a hundred years, is no longer fit-for-purpose, in that unlovely phrase. According to the management it does not reflect the dynamic, streamlined nature of modern newsgathering. It has too many places to hide, the hacks observe bad-temperedly, as they are prised from their positions, like limpets clinging stubbornly to a holed hull.

‘We should celebrate it,’ says Melissa, head of Features, from the editor’s almost-cleared office. She’s wearing a wine-coloured silk dress. On Ellie, this would have looked like her grandmother’s nightie; on Melissa it looks like what it is – defiantly high fashion.

‘The move?’ Ellie’s glancing at her mobile phone, set to silent, beside her. Around her, the other Feature writers are silent, notepads on knees.

‘Yes. I was talking to one of the librarians the other evening. He says there are lots of old files that haven’t been looked at in years. I want something on the women’s pages from fifty years ago. How attitudes have changed, fashions, women’s preoccupations. Case studies, side by side, then and now.’ Melissa opens a file and pulls out several photocopied A3 sheets. She speaks with the easy confidence of someone accustomed to being listened to. ‘For instance, from our problem pages: “What on earth can I do to get my wife to dress more smartly and to make herself more attractive? My income is £1500 a year, and I am beginning to make my way in a sales organisation. I am very often getting invitations from customers, but in recent weeks I have had to dodge them because my wife, frankly, looks a mess.”’

There is a low chuckle around the room.

‘“I have tried to put it to her in a gentle way, and she says that she doesn’t care about fashions or jewellery or makeup. Frankly she doesn’t look like the wife of a successful man, which is what I want her to be.”’

John had once told Ellie that, after the children, his wife had lost interest in her appearance. He had changed the subject almost as soon as he had introduced it, and never referred to it again, as if he felt what he had said was even more of a betrayal than sleeping with another woman. Ellie had resented that hint of gentlemanly loyalty even while a bit of her admired him for it.

But it had stuck in her imagination. She had pictured his wife: slatternly in a stained nightdress, clutching a baby and haranguing him for some supposed deficit. She wanted to tell him she would never be like that with him.

‘One could put the questions to a modern agony aunt.’ Rupert, the Saturday editor, leans forward to peer at the other photocopied pages.

‘I’m not sure you’d need to. Listen to the response: “It may never have occurred to your wife that she is meant to be part of your shop window. She may, in so far as she thinks about these things at all, tell herself that she’s married, secure, happy, so why should she bother?”’

‘Ah,’ says Rupert. ‘The deep, deep peace of the double bed’.”
“I have seen this happen remarkably quickly to girls who fall in love just as much as to women who potter about in the cosy wrap of an old marriage. One moment they’re smart as new paint, battling heroically with their waistlines, seams straight, anxiously dabbed with perfume. Some man says, ‘I love you,’ and the next moment that shining girl is, as near as makes no difference, a slut. A happy slut.”

The room fills briefly with polite, appreciative laughter.

‘What’s your choice, girls? Battle heroically with your waistline, or become a happy slut?’

‘I think I saw a film of that name not long ago,’ says Rupert. His smile fades when he realises the laughter has died.

‘There’s a lot we can do with this stuff.’ Melissa gestures towards the folder. ‘Ellie, can you dig around a bit this afternoon? See what else you might find. We’re looking at forty, fifty years ago. A hundred will be too alienating. The editor’s keen for us to highlight the move in a way that will bring readers along with us.’

‘You want me to go through the archive?’

‘Is that a problem?’

Not if you like sitting in dark cellars full of mildewing paper policed by dysfunctional men with Stalinist mindsets, who apparently haven’t seen daylight for thirty years. ‘Not at all,’ she says brightly. ‘I’m sure I’ll find something.’

‘Get a couple of workies to help you, if you like. I’ve heard there’s a couple lurking in the fashion cupboard.’

Ellie doesn’t register the malevolent satisfaction crossing her editor’s features at the thought of sending the latest batch of Anna Wintour wannabes deep into the bowels of the newspaper. She’s busy thinking, Bugger. No mobile reception underground.

‘By the way, Ellie, where were you this morning?’

‘What?’

‘This morning. I wanted you to rewrite that piece about children and bereavement. Yes? Nobody seemed to know where you were.’

‘I was out doing an interview.’

‘Who with?’

A body-language expert, Ellie thought, would have identified correctly that Melissa’s blank smile was more of a snarl.

‘Lawyer. Whistleblower. I was hoping to work something up on sexism in chambers.’ It’s out almost before she knows what she’s saying.

‘Sexism in the City. Hardly sounds groundbreaking. Make sure you’re at your desk at the right time tomorrow. Speculative interviews in your own time. Yes?’

‘Right.’

‘Good. I want a double-page spread for the first Compass Quay edition. Something along the lines of plus ça change.’ She is scribbling in her leather-backed notebook.

‘Preoccupations, ads, problems . . . Bring me a few pages later this afternoon and we’ll see what you’ve got.’
‘Will do.’ Ellie’s smile is the brightest and most workmanlike in the whole room as she follows the others out of the office. 

*Spent today in modern day equivalent of purgatory,* she types, pausing to take a sip of her wine. *Newspaper archive office. You want to be grateful you only make stuff up.*

He has messaged her from his hotmail account. He calls himself Penpusher; a joke between the two of them. She curls her feet under her on the chair and waits, willing the machine to signal his response.

*You’re a terrible heathen. I love archives,* the screen responds. *Remind me to take you to the British Newspaper Library for our next hot date.*

She grins. *You know how to show a girl a good time.*

*I do my best.*

*The only human librarian has given me a great wedge of loose papers. Not the most exciting bedtime reading.*

Afraid this sounds sarcastic, she follows it with a smiley face, then curses as she remembers he once wrote an essay for the *Literary Review* on how the smiley face represented all that was wrong with modern communication.

*That was an ironic smiley face,* she adds, and stuffs her fist into her mouth.

*Hold on. Phone.* The screen stills.

Phone. His wife? He was in a hotel room in Dublin. It overlooked the water, he had told her. *You would love it.* What was she meant to say to that? *Then bring me next time?* Too demanding. *I’m sure I would?* Sounded almost sarcastic. *Yes,* she had replied, finally, and let out a long, unheard sigh.

*It’s all her own fault,* her friends tell her. Unusually for her, she can’t disagree. She had met him at a book festival in Suffolk, sent to interview this thriller writer who had made a fortune after he had given up on more literary offerings. His name is John Armour, his hero, Dan Hobson, an almost cartoonish amalgam of old-fashioned masculine traits. She had interviewed him over lunch, expecting a rather chippy defence of the genre, perhaps a few moans about the publishing industry — she always found writers rather wearying to interview. She had expected someone paunchy, middle-aged, puddingy after years of being desk-bound. But the tall, tanned man who rose to shake her hand had been lean and freckly, resembling a weathered South African farmer. He was funny, charming, self-deprecating and attentive. He had turned the interview on her, asking her questions about herself, then told her his theories on the origin of language and how he believed communication was morphing into something dangerously flaccid and ugly.

When the coffee arrived, she realised she hadn’t put pen to notepad for almost forty minutes.

*‘Don’t you love the sound of them, though?’* she said, as they left the restaurant and headed back towards the literary festival. It was late in the year and the winter sun had dipped below the low buildings of the quietening high street. She had drunk too much,
had reached the point at which her mouth would race off defiantly before she had worked out what she should say. She hadn’t wanted to leave the restaurant.

‘Which ones?’

‘Spanish. Mostly Italian. I’m sure it’s why I love Italian opera, and I can’t stand the German ones. All those hard, guttural noises.’ He had considered this, and his silence unnerved her. She began to stutter: ‘I know it’s terribly unfashionable, but I love Puccini. I love that high emotion. I love the curling r, the staccato of the words . . .’ She tailed away as she heard how ridiculously pretentious she sounded.

He paused in a doorway, gazed briefly up the road behind them, then turned back to her. ‘I don’t like opera.’ He had stared at her directly as he said it. As if it were a challenge. She felt something give, deep in the pit of her stomach. Oh, God, she thought.

‘Ellie,’ he said, after they had stood there for almost a minute. It was the first time he had called her by name. ‘Ellie, I have to pick up something from my hotel before I go back to the festival. Would you like to come with me?’

Even before he shut the bedroom door behind them, they were on each other, bodies pressed together, mouths devouring, locked together as their hands performed the urgent, frantic choreography of undressing.

Afterwards she would look back on her behaviour and marvel as if at some kind of aberration seen from afar. In the hundreds of times she had replayed it, she had rubbed away the significance, the overwhelming emotion, and was left only with details. Her underwear, everyday, inappropriate, flung across a trouser press; the way they had giggled insanely on the floor afterwards underneath the multi-patterned synthetic hotel quilt; how he had cheerfully, and with inappropriate charm, handed back his key to the receptionist later that afternoon.

He had called two days later, as the euphoric shock of that day was seguing into something more disappointing.

‘You know I’m married,’ he said. ‘You read my cuttings.’

I’ve googled every last reference to you, she told him silently.

‘I’ve never been . . . unfaithful before. I still can’t quite articulate what happened.’

‘I blame the quiche,’ she quipped, wincing.

‘You do something to me, Ellie Haworth. I haven’t written a word in forty-eight hours.’ He paused. ‘You make me forget what I want to say.’

Then I’m doomed, she thought, because as soon as she had felt his weight against her, his mouth on hers, she had known – despite everything she had ever said to her friends about married men, everything she had ever believed – that she required only the faintest acknowledgement from him of what had happened for her to be lost.

A year on, she still hadn’t begun to look for a way out.

He comes back online almost forty-five minutes later. In this time she has left her computer, fixed herself another drink, wandered the flat aimlessly, peering at her skin
in a bathroom mirror, then gathering up stray socks and hurling them into the laundry basket. She hears the ping of a message and hurls herself into her chair.

_Sorry. Didn’t mean to be so long. Hope to speak tomorrow._

No mobile-phone calls, he had said. Mobile bills were itemised.

_Are you in hotel now?_ she types rapidly. _I could call you in your room._ The spoken word was a luxury, a rare opportunity. God, but she just needed to hear his voice.

_Got to go to a dinner, gorgeous. Sorry – behind already. Later x_

And he is gone.

She stares at the empty screen. He will be striding off through the hotel foyer now, charming the reception staff, climbing into whatever car the festival has organised for him. Tonight he will give a clever off-the-cuff speech over dinner and then be his usual amused, slightly wistful self to those lucky enough to sit at his table. He will be out there, living his life to the full, when she seems to have put hers perennially on hold.

What the hell was she doing?

‘What the hell am I doing?’ she says aloud, hitting the off button. She shouts her frustration at the bedroom ceiling, flops down on her vast, empty bed. She can’t call her friends: they’ve endured these conversations too many times, and she can guess what their response will be – what it can only be. What Doug had said to her was painful. But she would say exactly the same to any of them.

She sits on the sofa, flicks on the television. Finally, glancing at the pile of papers at her side, she hauls them on to her lap, cursing Melissa. A miscellaneous pile, the librarian had said, cuttings that bore no date and had no obvious category – ‘I haven’t got time to go through them all. We’re turning up so many piles like this.’ He was the only librarian under fifty down there. She wondered, fleetingly, why she’d never noticed him before.

‘See if there’s anything that’s of use to you.’ He had leant forward conspiratorially. ‘Throw away whatever you don’t want but don’t say anything to the boss. We’re at the stage now when we can’t afford to go through every last bit of paper.’

It soon becomes apparent why: a few theatre reviews, a passenger list for a cruise ship, some menus from celebratory newspaper dinners. She flicks through them, glancing up occasionally at the television. There’s not much here that’ll excite Melissa.

Now she’s leafing through a battered file of what looks like medical records. All lung disease, she notes absently. Something to do with mining. She’s about to tip the whole lot into the bin when a pale blue corner catches her eye. She tugs at it with an index finger and thumb and pulls out a hand-addressed envelope. It’s been opened, and the letter inside is dated 4 October 1960.

_My dearest and only love,_

_I meant what I said. I have come to the conclusion that the only way forward is for one of us to take a bold decision._
I am not as strong as you. When I first met you, I thought you were a fragile little thing, someone I had to protect. Now I realise I had us all wrong. You are the strong one, the one who can endure living with the possibility of a love like this, and the fact that we will never be allowed it.

I ask you not to judge me for my weakness. The only way I can endure is to be in a place I will never see you, never be haunted by the possibility of seeing you with him. I need to be somewhere where sheer necessity forces you from my thoughts minute by minute, hour by hour. That cannot happen here.

I am going to take the job. I’ll be at Platform 4, Paddington, at 7.15 on Friday evening, and there is nothing in the world that would make me happier than if you found the courage to come with me.

If you don’t come, I’ll know that whatever we might feel for each other, it isn’t quite enough. I won’t blame you, my darling. I know the past weeks have put an intolerable strain on you, and I feel the weight of that keenly. I hate the thought that I could cause you any unhappiness.

I’ll be waiting on the platform from a quarter to seven. Know that you hold my heart, my hopes, in your hands.

Your

B

Ellie reads it a second time, and finds her eyes welling inexplicably with tears. She can’t take her eyes off the large, looped handwriting; the immediacy of the words springs out to her more than forty years after they were hidden. She turns it over, checks the envelope for clues. It’s addressed to PO Box 13, London. It could be a man or a woman. What did you do, PO Box 13? she asks silently.

Then she gets up, replaces the letter carefully in the envelope and walks over to her computer. She opens the mail file and presses ‘refresh’. Nothing since the message she had received at seven forty-five.

Got to go to a dinner, gorgeous. Sorry – behind already. Later x

Part 1

The only way I can endure is to be in a place I will never see you, never be haunted by the possibility of seeing you with him. I need to be somewhere where sheer necessity forces you from my thoughts minute by minute, hour by hour. That cannot happen here.

I am going to take the job. I’ll be at Platform 4, Paddington, at 7.15 on Friday evening, and there is nothing in the world that would make me happier than if you found the courage to come with me.

Male to Female, via letter

1960

‘She’s waking up.’
There was a swishing sound, a chair was dragged, then the brisk click of curtain rings meeting. Two voices murmuring.

‘I’ll fetch Mr Hargreaves.’

A brief silence followed, during which she slowly became aware of a different layer of sound noise – voices, muffled by distance, a car passing: it seemed, oddly, as if it were some way below her. She lay absorbing it, letting it crystallise, letting her mind play catch-up, as she recognised each for what it was.

It was at this point that she became aware of the pain. It forced its way upwards in exquisite stages: first her arm, a sharp, burning sensation from elbow to shoulder, then her head: dull, relentless. The rest of her body ached, as it had done when she . . .

When she . . . ?

‘He’ll be along in two ticks. He says to close the blinds.’

Her mouth was so dry. She closed her lips and swallowed painfully. She wanted to ask for some water, but the words wouldn’t come. She opened her eyes a little. Two indistinct shapes moved around her. Every time she thought she had worked out what they were they moved again. Blue. They were blue.

‘You know who’s just come in downstairs, don’t you?’

One of the voices dropped. ‘Eddie Cochrane’s girlfriend. The one who survived the car crash. She’s been writing songs for him. In his memory, rather.’

‘She won’t be as good as he was, I’ll wager.’

‘She’s had newspaper men in all morning. Matron’s at her wit’s end.’

She couldn’t understand what they were saying. The pain in her head had become a thumping, rushing sound, building in volume and intensity until all she could do was close her eyes again and wait for it, or her, to go away. Then the white came in, like a tide, to envelop her. With some gratitude she let out a silent breath and allowed herself to sink back into its embrace.

‘Are you awake, dear? You have a visitor.’

There was a flickering reflection above her, a phantasm that moved briskly, first one way and then another. She had a sudden recollection of her first wristwatch, the way she had reflected sunlight through its glass casing on to the ceiling of the playroom, sending it backwards and forwards, making her little dog bark.

The blue was there again. She saw it move, accompanied by the swishing. And then there was a hand on her wrist, a brief spark of pain so that she yelped.

‘A little more carefully with that side, Nurse,’ the voice chided. ‘She felt that.’

‘I’m terribly sorry, Mr Hargreaves.’

‘The arm will require further surgery. We’ve pinned it in several places, but it’s not there yet.’

A dark shape hovered near her feet. She willed it to solidify, but, like the blue shapes, it refused to do so, and she let her eyes close.

‘You can sit with her, if you like. Talk to her. She’ll be able to hear you.’

‘How are her . . . other injuries?’
‘There’ll be some scarring, I’m afraid. Especially on that arm. And she took quite a blow to the head, so it may be a while before she’s herself again. But, given the severity of the accident, I think we can say she’s had a rather lucky escape.’

There was a brief silence.

‘Yes.’

Someone had placed a bowl of fruit beside her. She had opened her eyes again, her gaze settling on it, letting the shape, the colour solidify until she grasped, with a stab of satisfaction, that she could identify what was there. Grapes, she said. And again, rolling the silent word around the inside of her head: grapes. If felt important, as if it were anchoring her in this new reality.

And then, as quickly as they had come, they were gone, obliterated by the dark blue mass that had settled beside her. As it moved closer, she could just make out the faint scent of tobacco. The voice, when it came, was tentative, perhaps a little embarrassed, even. ‘Jennifer? Jennifer? Can you hear me?’

The words were so loud; strangely intrusive.

‘Jenny, dear, it’s me.’

She wondered if they would let her see the grapes again. It seemed necessary that she did; blooming, purple, solid. Familiar.

‘Are you sure she can hear me?’

‘Quite sure, but she may find communicating rather exhausting to begin with.’

There was some murmuring that she couldn’t make out. Or perhaps she just stopped trying. Nothing seemed clear. ‘Can . . . you . . .’ she whispered.

‘But her mind wasn’t damaged? In the crash? You know that there will be no . . . lasting . . .?’

‘As I said, she took a good bump to the head, but there were no medical signs for alarm.’ The sound of shuffled papers. ‘No fracture. No swelling to the brain. But these things are always a little unpredictable, and patients are affected quite differently. So, you’ll just need to be a little—’

‘Please . . .’ Her voice was a murmur, barely audible.

‘Mr Hargreaves! I do believe she’s trying to speak.’

‘. . . want to see . . .’

A face swam down to her. ‘Yes?’

‘. . . want to see . . .’ The grapes, she was begging. I just want to see those grapes again.

‘She wants to see her husband!’ The nurse sprang upwards as she announced this triumphantly. ‘I think she wants to see her husband.’

There was a pause, then someone stooped towards her. ‘I’m here, dear. Everything is . . . everything’s fine.’

The body retreated, and she heard the pat of a hand on a back. ‘There, you see? She’s getting back to herself already. All in good time, eh?’ A man’s voice again.

‘Nurse? Go and ask Sister to organise some food for tonight. Nothing too substantial.
Something light and easy to swallow . . . Perhaps you could fetch us a cup of tea while you’re there.’ She heard footsteps, low voices as they continued to talk beside her. Her last thought as the light closed in again was, Husband?

Later, when they told her how long she had been in the hospital, she could barely believe it. Time had become fragmented, unmanageable, arriving and departing in chaotic clumps of hours. It was Tuesday breakfast. Now it was Wednesday lunchtime. She had apparently slept for eighteen hours – this was said with some disapproval, as if there were an implied rudeness in being absent for so long. And then it was Friday. Again.

Sometimes when she woke it was dark, and she would push her head up a little against the starched white pillow and watch the soothing movements of the ward at night; the soft-shoe shuffle of the nurses moving up and down the corridors, the occasional murmur of conversation between nurse and patient. She could watch television in the evenings if she liked, the nurses told her. Her husband was paying for private care – she could have almost anything she liked. She always said no, thank you: she was confused enough by the unsettling torrent of information without the endless chatter of the box in the corner.

As the periods of wakefulness stretched and grew in number, she became familiar with the faces of the other women on the little ward. The older woman in the room to her right, whose jet-black hair was pinned immaculately in a rigid, sprayed sculpture upon her head: her features fixed in an expression of mild, surprised disappointment. She had apparently been in a moving picture when she was young, and would deign to tell any new nurse about it. She had a commanding voice, and few visitors. There was the plump young woman in the room opposite, who cried quietly in the early hours of the morning. A brisk, older woman – a nanny perhaps? – brought young children in to see her for an hour every evening. The two boys would climb onto the bed, clutching at her, until the nanny told them to get down for fear they would ‘do your mother an injury’.

The nurses told her the other women’s names, and occasionally their own, but she couldn’t remember them. They were disappointed in her, she suspected.

Your Husband, as everyone referred to him, came most evenings. He wore a well-cut suit, dark blue or grey serge, gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek and usually sat at the foot of her bed. He would make small-talk solicitously, asking how she was finding the food, whether she would like him to have anything else sent along. Occasionally he would simply read a newspaper.

He was a handsome man, perhaps ten years older than she was, with a high, aquiline forehead, and serious, hooded eyes. She knew, at some deep level, that he must be who he said he was, that she was married to him, but it was perplexing to feel nothing when everyone so obviously expected a different reaction. Sometimes she would stare at him when he wasn’t looking, waiting for some jolt of familiarity to kick in.
Sometimes, when she woke, she would find him sitting there, newspaper lowered, gazing at her as if he felt something similar.

Mr Hargreaves, the consultant, came daily, checking her charts, asking if she could tell him the day, the time, her name. She always got those right now. She even managed to tell him the prime minister was Mr Macmillan and her age, twenty-seven. But she struggled with newspaper headlines, with events that had taken place before she arrived here. ‘It will come,’ he would say, patting her hand. ‘Don’t try to force it, there’s a good girl.’

And then there was her mother, who brought little gifts, soap, nice shampoo, magazines, as if they would nudge her into a semblance of who she apparently used to be. ‘We’ve all been so worried, Jenny darling,’ she said, laying a cool hand on her head. It felt nice. Not familiar, but nice. Occasionally her mother would begin to say something, then mutter, ‘I mustn’t tire you out with questions. Everything will come back. That’s what the doctors say. So you mustn’t worry.’

She wasn’t worried, Jenny wanted to tell her. It was quite peaceful in her little bubble. She just felt a vague sadness that she couldn’t be the person everyone evidently expected her to be. It was at this point, when the thoughts got too confusing, that she would invariably fall asleep again.

They finally told her she was going home on a morning so crisp that the trails of smoke crossed the bright blue winter sky above the capital like a spindly forest. By then she could walk around the ward occasionally, swapping magazines with the other patients, who would be chatting to the nurses, occasionally listening to the wireless, if they felt so inclined. She had had a second operation on her arm and it was healing well, they told her, although the long red scar where the plate had been inserted made her wince, and she tried to keep it hidden under a long sleeve. Her eyes had been tested, her hearing checked; her skin had healed after the myriad scratches caused by fragments of glass. The bruises had faded, and her broken rib and collarbone had knitted well enough for her to lie in a variety of positions without pain.

To all intents and purposes, she looked, they claimed, like ‘her old self’, as if saying it enough times might make her remember who that was. Her mother, meanwhile, spent hours rummaging through piles of black and white photographs so that she could reflect Jennifer’s life back at her.

She learnt that she had been married for four years. There were no children – from her mother’s lowered voice, she guessed this was a source of some disappointment to everyone. She lived in a very smart house in a very good part of London, with a housekeeper and a driver, and plenty of young ladies would apparently give their eyeteeth to have half of what she had. Her husband was something big in mining and was often away, although his devotion was such that he had put off several very important trips since the accident. From the deference with which the medical staff spoke to him, she guessed he was indeed quite important and, by extension, that she might expect a degree of respect, too, even if it felt nonsensical to her.
Nobody had said much about how she had got there, although she had once sneaked a look at the doctor’s notes and knew that she had been in a car accident. On the one occasion she had pressed her mother about what had happened she had gone quite pink and, placing her plump little hand on Jennifer’s, had urged her ‘not to dwell on it, dear. It’s all been . . . terribly upsetting.’ Her eyes had filled with tears and, not wanting to upset her, Jennifer had moved on.

A chatty girl with a bright orange helmet of hair had come from another part of the hospital to trim and set Jennifer’s hair. This, the young woman told her, would make her feel a lot better. Jennifer had lost a little hair at the back of her head – it had been shaved off for a wound to be stitched – and the girl announced that she was a wonder at hiding such injuries.

A little more than an hour later she held up a mirror with a flourish. Jennifer stared at the girl who stared back at her. Quite pretty, she thought, with a kind of distant satisfaction. Bruised, a little pale, but an agreeable face. My face, she corrected herself.

‘Do you have your cosmetics to hand?’ the hairdresser said. ‘I could do your face for you, if your arm’s still sore. Bit of lipstick will brighten any face, madam. That and some pancake.’

Jennifer kept staring at the mirror. ‘Do you think I should?’

‘Oh, yes. A pretty girl like you. I can make it very subtle . . . but it’ll put a glow into your cheeks. Hold on, I’ll pop downstairs and get my kit. I’ve got some lovely colours from Paris, and a Charles of the Ritz lipstick that’ll be perfect on you.’

‘Well, don’t you look fetching? It’s good to see a lady with her makeup on. Shows us that you’re a little more on top of things,’ Mr Hargreaves said, on his rounds, some time later. ‘Looking forward to going home, are we?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ she said politely. She had no idea how to convey to him that she didn’t know what that home was.

He studied her face for a moment, perhaps gauging her uncertainty. Then he sat on the side of her bed and laid a hand on her shoulder. ‘I understand it must all seem a little disconcerting, that you might not feel quite yourself yet, but don’t be too concerned if lots of things are unclear. It’s quite common to get amnesia after a head injury.

‘You have a very supportive family, and I’m sure once you’re surrounded by familiar things, your old routines, friends, shopping trips and the like, you’ll find that it’s all popping back into place.’

She nodded obediently. She had worked out pretty quickly that everyone seemed happier if she did so.

‘Now, I’d like you to come back in a week so that I can check the progress of that arm. You’ll need some physiotherapy to recover the full use of it. But the main thing is simply for you to rest, and not worry too much about anything. Do you understand?’
He was already preparing to leave. What else could she say? Her husband picked her up shortly before tea-time. The nurses had lined up in the downstairs reception area to say goodbye to her, bright as pins in their starched pinafores. She still felt curiously weak and unsteady on her feet, and was grateful for the arm that he held out to her.

‘Thank you for the care you’ve shown my wife. Send the bill to my office, if you would,’ he said to the sister.

‘Our pleasure,’ she said, shaking his hand and beaming at Jennifer. ‘It’s lovely seeing her up and about again. You look wonderful, Mrs Stirling.’

‘I feel . . . much better. Thank you.’ She was wearing a long cashmere coat and a matching pillbox hat. He had arranged for three outfits to be sent over for her. She had chosen the most muted; she didn’t want to draw attention to herself.

They glanced up as Mr Hargreaves put his head out of an office. ‘My secretary says there are some newspaper men outside – here to see the Cochrane girl. You might wish to leave by the back entrance if you want to avoid any fuss.’

‘That would be preferable. Would you mind sending my driver round?’

After weeks in the warmth of the ward the air was shockingly cold. She struggled to keep up with him, her breath coming in short bursts, and then she was in the back of a large black car, engulfed by the huge leather seats, and the doors closed with an expensive clunk. The car moved off into the London traffic with a low purr.

She peered out of the window, watching the newspaper men, just visible on the front steps, and muffled photographers comparing lenses. Beyond, the central London streets were thick with people hurrying past, their collars turned up against the wind, men with trilbies pulled low over their brows.

‘Who is the Cochrane girl?’ she said, turning to face him.

He was muttering something to the driver. ‘Who?’

‘The Cochrane girl. Mr Hargreaves was talking about her.’

‘I believe she was the girlfriend of a popular singer. They were involved in a car crash shortly before . . .’

‘They were all talking about her. The nurses, at the hospital.’

He appeared to have lost interest. ‘I’ll be dropping Mrs Stirling back at the house, and once she’s settled I’ll be going on to the office,’ he was saying to the driver.

‘What happened to him?’ she said.

‘Who?’

‘Cochrane. The singer.’

Her husband looked at her, as if he was weighing something up. ‘He died,’ he said. Then he turned back to his driver.

She walked slowly up the steps to the white stucco house and the door opened, as if by magic, as she reached the top. The driver placed her valise carefully in the hallway, then retreated. Her husband, behind her, nodded to a woman who was standing in the hallway, apparently to greet them. In late middle age, her dark hair was pulled back
into a tight chignon and she was dressed in a navy two piece. ‘Welcome home, madam,’ she said, reaching out a hand. Her smile was genuine, and she spoke in heavily accented English. ‘We are so very glad to have you well again.’

‘Thank you,’ she said. She wanted to use the woman’s name, but felt uncomfortable asking it.

The woman waited to take their coats, and disappeared along the hall with them. ‘Are you feeling tired?’ He dipped his head to study her face.

‘No. No, I’m fine.’ She gazed around her at the house, wishing she could disguise her dismay that she might as well never have seen it before.

‘I must go back to the office now. Will you be all right with Mrs Cordoza?’

Cordoza. It wasn’t entirely unfamiliar. She felt a little surge of gratitude. Mrs Cordoza. ‘I’ll be quite all right, thank you. Please don’t worry about me.’

‘I’ll be back at seven . . . if you’re sure you’re fine . . .’ He was clearly keen to leave. He stooped, kissed her cheek, and, after a brief hesitation, was gone.

She stood in the hallway, hearing his footsteps fade down the steps outside, the soft hum of the engine as his great car pulled away. The house seemed suddenly cavernous.

She touched the silk-lined wallpaper, took in the polished parquet flooring, the vertiginously high ceilings. She removed her gloves, with precise, deliberate motion. Then she leant forward for a closer look at the photographs on the hall table. The largest was a wedding picture, framed in ornate, highly polished silver. And there she was, wearing a fitted white dress, her face half masked by a white lace veil, her husband smiling broadly at her side. I really did marry him, she thought. And then: I look so happy.

She jumped. Mrs Cordoza had come up behind her and was standing there, her hands clasped in front of her. ‘I was wondering if you would like me to bring you some tea. I thought you might like to take it in the drawing room. I’ve laid a fire in there for you.’

‘That would be . . .’ Jennifer peer down the hallway at the various doors. Then she looked back at the photograph. A moment passed before she spoke again. ‘Mrs Cordoza . . . would you mind letting me take your arm? Just till I sit down. I’m feeling a little unsteady on my feet.

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