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1976

Let me tell you about love, and how I concluded at seventeen that it did not exist after all – that love I’d longed for as an antidote to everything I’d lived, that would fling a ladder spun of my own hair up to me in my walled-in castle. How ordinary was my love story, and yet I was so deeply disappointed in love I tried to die. I should have died – and yet I was saved from death, and not by love but by some passing stranger, by the weird and clammy hand of fate.

Who did I choose as my great love – a handsome boy, a man of passion, a young romantic with a head of books like mine? I picked someone whose secret perfume told me he was not safe. I plucked my heart out and flung it in his palm and told him not to crush it. I chose this one from all the others.

Decades later, I think, amazed: I chose *all* of them. The only security, insecurity, the only certainty, uncertainty, the only solid floor a shifting sand of lies, the only safety in the arms of men who are not safe.

I’ll call him Martin. Martin, the man of destiny, the dark marauding stranger, the other, that all the others after frighteningly emulate. Martin, the template for romantic doom. The beast that every pining princess seeks to marry and, by the

translucency of her love, to change – to transform into a shining prince.

Well, was he handsome? He was lithe and graceful. He walked with an adolescent panther's grace. He was tall and slender, and he moved as if he knew that he was dangerous.

We were winding up the driveway through the trees, the Citroen moving stealthily like a beetle amongst the shadows. I was staring out the side window, sunk in a familiar torpor. I had no sense of what was almost upon me, even as the car halted and, with a ridiculous prance, sank down on its forepaws. My boyfriend stepped out and began to murmur to his friend. Bored with my own thoughts after a time, I glanced up in the direction of their voices, and everything changed. Everything changed, with that one glance.

What did I fall for? Pants? The length of his thigh in jeans? That was my first sight of him, my view constrained by the window of the car. The shape of his thigh is what first reeled me in. And then his face in profile, insolent, cocky, Irish, and his eyes, glittering in the sunlight, full of knowing and, with it, laughter, or mockery. He was dark-haired, and in profile he had the face of a hawk and his eyelashes swooped down over his narrowed eyes like wings. He turned his head and glanced at me, and for a moment he had the eyes of a bird of prey. Then he turned away, back to my boyfriend, who gazed up at Martin with his pale face animated, and his hands sketching something intricate and yet fully realised into the air.

So I was surprised – a sudden dart of excitement and alarm – and not surprised to see Martin at my boyfriend's place later that week. I hid my knowledge of his presence and my excitement at his presence and acted, as I was meant to, as if I believed it was all in the course of normal events or simply a matter of chance that he was there, and he too behaved as if it was of no

particular importance, his being there in my boyfriend's parents' leaf-dappled yard. And perhaps the pretence was the reality, and he had not come there for me, drawn to me, and there was nothing to be read into the glance we had exchanged a few days earlier, or the knowledge of the other we had by it imparted. I made every effort not to acknowledge him, not to indicate by demeanour or posture my strong awareness of his location at any given moment, and he moved amongst the other guests and through the garden, one moment absorbed in some conversation, the next aloof and quietly watching those about him with private amusement, and he moved with insolent grace. Did he seem to notice me particularly? Perhaps there was a glint in his eye, here or there, a twist to his mouth. He did not seek me out.

I know now that we were both quietly stalking one another, both predators beneath the trees, uncertain of the other's intent. But he was watching me, of this I am now certain, far more acutely than I was watching him.

He looked arrogant, I thought. Later, when we stood in closer proximity, I amended this impression to: He's shy, like me. I could not place him in world literature. Perhaps he could be a lean, quick-minded character in a Steinbeck novel, wearing Levis and a rolled-up shirt, leaning on a spade as cars flashed past. I had not read enough American fiction of the sixties and seventies yet.

This was my story and I was writing it. I was delighted to be writing this story at last – previously I had written only poems. I had been writing poetry since I learnt to write and spell. The older I got, the darker the poems became, but every so often I broke out into a kind of religious ecstasy and I wrote of things unseen and as yet unmet.

It was my story and it would be a fairy tale, I decided. He would be the prince of course, a dark prince, or else a prince who had stepped down from his throne in search of adventure – a gypsy

prince, a robber baron. And I would be... Who would I be? Who did he want me to be? I would be – unforgettable.

If I was a character in my father's story, then I was like Rapunzel, in daring costume. A man would come for me and I would be taken care of – a man, perhaps, much like himself. But I have never managed much interest in any man who had a steady job.

If I was a character in my mother's story, then I was Cinderella, always in ashes, waiting down below her, cleaning her house. And if a man would come for me, he'd be a fickle man, happy to flirt with her – together they would exchange smirking glances over my head and subtly widen their eyes. What a fool I was! At least they understood each other. And if my glass slipper didn't fit her foot she'd smash it on my head.

But I was writing this story. It would be a love story. I did not stop to consider that Martin might be crafting a very different story of his own. Oddly I never asked him then or later about his taste in fiction.

How did I manage to find myself alone with him and how did I manage to discard my natural caution and fling him an opening? I played an impetuous girl and asked him would he like to come late-night shopping with me that Thursday. I told myself it was the sort of invitation I might be extending to someone as a potential friend. He agreed with alacrity and arrangements were made, and on Thursday I found myself in the back of a taxi with him – the long expensive ride into town, over the bridge, the whole world gleaming in the light of the late afternoon – and by the time we were turning the corner into the city the light was dimming into blue-green evening and I took his hand to read his palm. How astonishingly forward I was in my silly seductive manoeuvres. I took his hand and led him into it.

And then we were moving through the glitter of mirrors, sampling the perfumes in the night-lit department store, delighting one another with our wit and intelligence and taste all the while until he, satisfied with my clumsily cautious signals, had declared himself by his movements and the proximity of his body, and we laughed into each other's eyes and found excuses to touch one another tentatively. The extravagance of the taxi seemed to signal that he was already aware of what a young woman like me might carry as unthought expectation – the following week he would present me with a bottle of what became my signature perfume, L'Air du Temps, a light delicious peppery scent, but that night I sniffed the delicate fragrance rising from my young arm for the first time and murmured to myself, 'Yes, yes, I will, of course I will.'

And then we travelled home together across the bridge in the rattling red train, over the city swooning in her jewels, and by this time I was secure enough in our declared love for one another to lean back into his arms as we hurtled through the dark green suburbs in our cocoon of light, and to not be too perturbed by his admission that he already had a girlfriend.

'You shall have to tell her you've met me,' I said, and returned to the bliss of his embrace.

I leapt into the assumption of safety and of reciprocity in his arms. I assumed so much. I assumed we were the same. He bent to kiss me tenderly and to stroke and kiss my neck and caress my hair, and I closed my eyes and leant into him, his body built to enclose mine, and I could not imagine how it had taken so long for us to find each other. It was as I had imagined it would be and now everything would be all right.

How improbable it all seems, and how open to ridicule, that on our third meeting we declared our love, knowing nothing of each other – and yet years later I was to spend twelve years

with a man who professed to love me and find, in the end, I did not know him and was not loved by him at all.

There is so much that is uncertain, yet of this I am entirely certain: It began with Martin when I felt it begin, like the moment of conception felt as a pinpoint of light striking flesh, when our eyes first met, and then on our second meeting when our eyes sought each other out amongst all the others, and we first spoke.

'I knew it would be like this, I knew we would be together, you and I,' I told him.

I was oracular in the intensity of my happiness. I cared only that I held him and that he wanted me. Perhaps we were alike after all, both demanding and in our different ways both reckless. The train was rushing through the night, through the suburbs, rattling with impatience, and he pulled me more closely to him and urgently kissed my forehead, my eyes, my cheeks, as if we were heading into winter, into a colder darkness, and had only the other to keep ourselves alive.

What odd flints we are, though, we humans, and what strange fires our unions start. I knew the moment I saw him that I wanted him, and I knew that I must have him, and I would, and I knew it with a certainty that I no longer dare to entertain, now that I am a woman more than twice that age.

I was so glad to have found someone who would enact the part of lover, someone who I would love back as fervently as I was loved, someone who would kiss me, as he did, and clasp me close, feverish with need. I was so lacking in subterfuge myself, I doubt I would have believed him had he told me it was just a game to him.

Martin drove over after work the next day in his father's car — his was being fixed. Then I was off to the country for an old boyfriend's birthday celebration. The first night I was back,

Martin came over and we drove to a cemetery and wandered there under the full moon, talking. He rang the following night and arranged to pick me up from school in his own car, an old Italian sports car, and he drove me out to Dural and then into town again to see a film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. We were together then almost every night for the next two weeks.

My love had a girlfriend, a steady girlfriend of several years, and he was, maybe, engaged – they had an understanding. This was not an impediment to me. We had met, we had fallen, and he would tell her what had happened and that would be that for her. How utterly indifferent and incurious I was regarding her. As if this sudden severing of her life and hopes was a mere formality. He would tell her the facts and she would accept them and she would disappear into the ether. It would be obvious to her that our love was the true and important love and she was the mistake. She would not even cry, it would be so obvious to her. It was never about her, for me.

I don't think I even asked him how it went. He would have lied, I know that now. If I had asked him, he would have lied to me. Perhaps I asked, and he murmured something, which I accepted, of course, and now I have forgotten it. Let us just say that she was erased from my consciousness entirely, for quite some time.

What can I say in my favour? I had been searching for love, for someone to love me, for someone who would recognise me and be mine, for someone who was and was not a stranger.

Martin was a stranger to me, and he was a strange one, also, like me. Perhaps that is why I fell so hard – finally, my own kind. But I was wrong there, evidently, though I did not know it at the time. He was the kind of stranger I'd been warned about in primary school, that I'd been casting an eye out for, vaguely, out of a love of horror stories. All those years of relishing the awful. He was the walking embodiment of stranger danger. You might almost say I'd drawn him to me with my morbid interest, as with a spell.

I had been searching for my own kind for so long that I had become ruthless suddenly, and desperate. After all, I had a boyfriend too, who I am fairly sure I did not tell of my change of heart. I let it filter down to him, as I recall – the fact that he had been summarily discarded.

I knew from the plots of countless novels, poems, plays and films that romantic love is always stolen, is love stolen from someone else, time ripped from the everyday, clutched at and consumed furtively in secret, even if at the time it doesn't seem that way. It is the opposite of safe love, publicly declared love, fidelity and boiled milk, although that is where, if things turn out happily, it is meant to be heading – behind the garden gate – but first the heady consummation, the delirious sense of one's everyday self being consumed by love's fine flames.

It was love – love, at last – we were in love with one another, and they would have to face it. Love had its own rules, I believed, and when the central players met upon the stage, the lights should alter and the boring chorus and supporting cast should step quietly and with respect back into the shadows of the wings.

My poor boyfriend. Slight, blond, girlish, virginal, small in stature and in height. I let his poetry flutter to the ground behind me. I shed him, after our long delicate mutual courtship, like a snake its skin, like a favourite dress now deemed a rag. Some time later that summer I visited him, and it crossed my mind I might have hurt him. I examined it as a curiosity, little more, and felt a surge of shame that quickly guttered – or else I snuffed it out.

Love was a pressing need. He ought to understand this, I thought. Love, and desire. He ought to have shown a little more of the latter, himself, I thought.

My heart could turn on a pin in those days, a sigh, a glance.

I fell in love with the animal in Martin. His panther grace, his scent, his lean and hungry length. I like tall men. Tall, slender men with mocking, knowing eyes. I learnt, from him,

that they felt right. Being with Martin was all about things feeling so right they just *had* to be.

He made love to me with some passion, and I felt stirring in me the beginnings of something I'd never before felt.

He fucked me and I felt...something. Something, I was sure of it. I felt almost as if I was there.