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ever said or taught me.

- Well, I never met your mother, I don't know anything except what you've told me; I'm not saying she did, I'm just throwing out some ideas. And you're certainly wrong about her not being independent. She brought you up on her own, she gave you love and security, and that's not easy. It wasn't easy for those women who were widowed in the war, but everyone knew their husbands had been heroes. It must have been much harder for your mother.

Lucia then thought about her mother in an entirely new way, remembering that she was always loving, that she was never harsh nor unreasonable, that she gave her a great deal of freedom, that she was allowed to do things that her friends could not - My mother wouldn't let me, or My Dad would kill me if he found out; and that she never interfered with her friends.

It was as though Freda had jogged her world out of focus. Everything had shifted. You looked at the picture one way and saw inside the box, then without moving your eyes the picture changed, you were looking down on to the top of the box.

And then in another way it was like the lancing of a boil, a long endured fever had abated, and with that came the return of her creativity. ~~It was as though~~ By telling the story, by naming the events, a power had been released; the act of telling had placed them into their correct perspective. It was as though she had shut off her feelings after parting from Chris; she became a spectator to the world around her, not a participant.

It was not the broken affair that had hurt so much as the memory of it, remembrance in which sorrow and pain were essential, a ritual of remembrance. But she had centred all that pain, all that emotional sorrow, not so much on the loss of Chris and his love, but on the abortion. Now she was released. She did not need to weep over it any more, and in any case Chris's defection was softened both by time and the demands of the war.

She could write again. The first poem she wrote was about the child who could have lived. It was not a personal lament. It was about a child who was struggling to become, who cried out silently for the right to emerge into a welcoming world, who spoke wordlessly for a world that did not destroy its infant victims, where they would not die through acts of violence and of war.

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Some time around Easter it was Passover, and Freda's parents invited Lucia to join them at the ceremonial dinner.

The blackout curtains are securely drawn. Outside the chilly suburb vanishes into impenetrable nothingness, a blackness so heavy and complete, you could almost hold it in your hand. Inside, candlelight wavers on gleaming silver and the best china.

The lawn in the back garden had long ago been dug up for vegetables and now Mrs Lewis has also acquired chickens of her own. There are sixteen sitting down to eat at the table.

Why is this night different from all other nights? Freda's brother Sam, a captain in some special ^{psychological} unit stationed in the north, has obtained special leave to join his family for Passover; he chants the questions as his father intones the answers.

In millions of homes all over the world, in so many different languages, they are asking the same questions, saying the same words. In occupied Europe, in the death camps, in the ghettos, the Jews, all of them, must be thinking of these words, of these ceremonies, of the times when they too could sit around a full table. Lucia, who has scorned and rejected religion, sees it in a new light; as a unifying factor, a social and cultural pattern established through tradition and habit; the dispersed threads drawn together.

She had been a bit afraid of meeting the formidably clever brother about whom Freda has spoken so often. But he is disarming, even diffident, short-sighted like Freda but with brown eyes behind his spectacles and curly auburn hair; tall and thin, the bones of ankles and wrists as prominent as his Adam's apple.

- How is it we never met before? she asks him. - Didn't you ever come to the tennis club?

- Couldn't stand the racket, Sam replies, and Freda groans. - Oh, for heaven's sake, Sam, hasn't the army cured you? Please! Not those awful puns! And to Lucia - He's been carrying on like that ever since he was a spotty little boy.

- Can the leopard change his spots? asks Sam.

- Ugh! Anyway, you were an intellectual snob.

- That's hardly fair, Freda, you know I never actually had the time. You were not studying the way I was.

- Yes, I know, you always had your nose in a book; but was it your studies that kept you away from the social round, or were they just an excuse for you, so that you could avoid going out into the world?

- I was fulfilling Mama and Papa's ambitions to have an educated son. And to do that I had to get scholarships, and to get them I had to be the best.

- But you didn't like our crowd anyway, Freda persisted. - Even when you

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had time you didn't want to come.

- True. I never felt really at home with them. There was a kind of latent anti-semitism. I know you were trying to prove how non-jewish you were, but I didn't share your petty-bourgeois aspirations. I didn't mind being jewish, I'd had it drummed into me from my school days.

- Maybe you didn't feel isolated, the way I did.

He smiles at her. - What do you know about my feelings? he asks.

- I can read you like a book, Freda replies.

- A magnum opus?

- No, just a slim volume.

There is a cousin that Lucia has not met before, a gunner from the artillery, on short leave, Norman.

- What do you think? Mrs Lewis says to Lucia. - A few years ago he was a major, yes, a real major. Now he's just a private.

Taken aback Lucia asks - But what did you do wrong?

- Quite simple. I fought for the right cause at the wrong time.

- He was in Spain, in the International Brigade, Sam explains. - He fought for freedom before it was fashionable.

- We could have defeated fascism then, says Norman. - It could have made all these years of war unnecessary. We could have defeated fascism then.

- We thought it was someone else's war, Lucia says.

- No, it was our war, it was everyone's war. When the Junkers came over and dropped their loads, it was as though they were burning our children.

- Párajos Négros - black birds, the Spanish called them, Sam says.

- Remember Guernica?

Who shall avenge Guernica? None will avenge her,

It is not the blood of our children that cries from the ground.

Death has no summons to call from the sky the revenger,

the murdered make no sound.

Over our shifts and surrenders, connivance unending,
hover the smoke and the reek of that smouldering pyre.

We will remember Guernica when black birds descending
our cities set on fire.

Lucia feels she is on the verge of finding out a new concept of love.

-Don't they recognise your war service? she asks

- The British Army? You must be joking! All of us who fought in Spain, whether we were or not, we are communists to them. We can't be trusted.

- Now that Russia is our ally, I would have thought those attitudes would have changed, or at least moderated.

- We're allies, not friends. A lot of us have valuable experience; it was a try-out in modern warfare for the Germans. But those in power won't take what we could give.

- Norman, Lucia asks, - do you regret those years?

- My part in it, you mean?

- Yes.

- Regret? It was the best of times. We knew what we were doing and why we were doing it, and we loved one another, we were bound together by a sense of common purpose, and - yes - I have to say it, even if it sounds sort of pretentious - a noble ideal. Even when we couldn't communicate properly because of language difficulties, you could feel it, the comradeship, the love. Those anti-fascist Germans that came . . . all those in the International Brigade. It was something special, beautiful.

Yes, she thinks, another kind of love.

Mrs Lewis has started to pile up dishes and clear the table.

- Mama, Sam says, - sit down. I'm doing the washing-up tonight.

- Oh Sam, no. You are on holiday. Minnie and Yetta will help me. You sit.

- You sit, Sam retorts. - I know what's been going on. You've been on your feet for at least two days to make everything for us. Freda and Lucia will help me.

- It's not right.

- Oh yes it is. Now don't you dare get up - if necessary I'll hold you to your chair while my assistants do the work.

- No one over thirty allowed in the kitchen, Freda says.

- And no one under fifteen, says Benny.

- Smarty-pants! All right, you can help us clear the table.

- He'll break something, Mrs Lewis protests.

- No he won't, says Sam, - because he knows that if he does, I'll break him.

In the kitchen Sam, wearing one of his mother's aprons, takes charge of the sink, while Lucia and Freda dry the dishes and put everything away.

- You enjoyed it, didn't you? Freda asks Lucia.

- Oh yes! It was happy and sad at the same time. I kept thinking of all the jews in Europe; even those who couldn't celebrate would be thinking of the words and the rituals. Everywhere.

- That's what we were all thinking. That's what gave it some meaning for me, at least on this occasion.

- It's funny, Lucia said, - I've never thought of religion in this way before, as something positive, a unifying factor, giving a sort of pattern to life, making people feel some sense of security through a shared belief. An assertion of their worth, of their history and culture, expressed in

this way.

- And all the stronger, Freda says, - because of those throughout the ages who sought to destroy it. Didn't you have religion in your home?

- Not in the same sense that you did. I know my mother believes, in a general kind of way, but she didn't go to church. People in our neighbourhood mostly were not church-goers. It was a kind of secular society, ours. I went to Sunday School because my friends went, and because if you went regularly you had a lovely outing in summer. I believed in god and then had a terrible time wrestling with my conscience when my faith started to waver.

- Why did you stop believing? asks Sam.

Lucia felt herself blushing. - It sounds so silly to say it, but I suppose the first doubts arose because I felt god had let me down. He just didn't come up to my expectations, or at least to the expectations that I had been told about. Why did they tell me god would answer my prayers provided I was good enough? He didn't bring my father back to me. And if this was because I had failed to achieve a sufficiently high standard, it seemed wrong to me - it still seems wrong - to involve any child in so heart-breaking a deal - that the restoration of a family should be dependent on the ability to avoid small daily deviations in behaviour. He wouldn't perform my personal miracle, and so I stopped believing in the other miracles. Childish, isn't it?

- You see, Freda says, - that's what religion is really about.

- Performing miracles - or not performing them?

- No, the other thing, non-deviating behaviour. Everything is laid down, moral attitudes, a routine of prayer and worship, a repetition of words that become meaningless. You don't have to think, you stick to the rules.

- It's so contraining!

- Yes, that's why so many hold on to it. At first it's contraining, then it becomes a protection. You stay within the limits and feel safe, there are rules for everything. You don't have to puzzle things out for yourself.

- Is that why you abandoned your religion?

- Oh! Freda exclaimed. - There were lots of things. Religion's a game men play, like war. Do you know that orthodox jews thank god every morning of their lives that they were not born women? And women can't form a minion - that's the group that's necessary for worship? And do you know that the women, when they get married, must shave their heads and wear a wig?

- Not your mother, surely?

- No, only the strictly orthodox, but there are plenty of them.

- But shouldn't we separate the theories from the protagonists? says Sam. - You can't blame the prophets for the rules that their followers lay down.

- You can't, Freda replies. - It all comes in one package. How can you believe without carrying out the rules? You're not a true Moslem unless you crouch down six times a day when someone blows a horn. And all men crouching. Where are the women? And you're not a Jew unless you've been circumcised and had a barmitzvah.

- In that sense, Lucia says, - Christianity has been the least demanding of religions. You can be a Christian by just believing in God and after-life. At the most church once a week on Sundays to show you believe.

- But there's still all that stuff about the virgin birth and the sadism, Jesus nailed to a cross. Oh, what are we talking about, after we've just enjoyed such a lovely evening, all that feasting, and the ritual.

- They knew what they were about in the old days, fasts and feasts. And I bet it was the women who were left with the dishes.

Later in the evening they gather around the piano for a sing-song, Sam playing. Benny won't join them, he can't trust his voice, which doesn't know if it is a child's or a man's. But Sam makes room for him to sit beside him on the piano stool. - Come, Benny, he says, I need someone to turn the pages for me. He puts his arm around Benny and draws him close. - OK? Benny smiles at him. - OK, Captain, he says.

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Sam turned up at their flat two weeks later and handed them each a Hershey bar. - Swopped them for State secrets, he said, then added - Of course, I'm just boasting. We're not trusted with any secrets important enough to swop for a Hershey bar. I've come to take you out.

- Lucia too? asked Freda.

- Of course Lucia. We need someone as a foil for our arguments, don't we?

- Where did you get the Hershey bars? Freda asked when they were seated at a bar.

- Ah, I didn't tell you, said Sam. - We've got Americans in our unit now. They've come to tell us how to win the war and how to make the peace. What fascinates me is that in my field they're all Jews, American and British. Or just about all. Are we Jews the only people who want to know what makes people the way they are?

- What is your field? Lucia asked.

- Social psychology.

- But what do you actually do?

- You mustn't ask that kind of question, they might find out that we don't actually do anything. That's why it's very, very secret and that makes it difficult to describe.

He was smiling. - However, he said, - I'll put it simply. It's just like working in an advertising agency. We've got to sell a line to the public, we've got to find out what's the correct psychological approach. In this case the public's Germany. First we were devising propaganda to undermine their morale. And now we're beginning to prepare for the time when the war is over, and who is going to run the country and what sort of structures to set up in place of the Nazi dictatorship. That sort of thing.

The next time Sam came to their flat Lucia opened the door. - I've come to take you out, he said.

- Freda too?

- Of course Freda. I need my little sister for a chaperone, protection.

- What are you afraid of?

- Those big dark eyes of yours. I'm just a boy Red Riding Hood, and I think you're a wolf in disguise?

- Disguised as a grandmother?

- The way the grandmother looked fifty years before; it just shows how clever you are at disguises.

- More likely you're the wolf, Freda remarked. And when she was alone with Sam she said - You like her, don't you?

- Like who?

- Oh, come off it, Sam, don't pretend with me. Anyway, you always did fancy pretty girls.

- Yes, Sam said, - I suppose you could put it that way. I like her.

Like her? he thought, I adore her, I love everything about her. I watch her face, the swift expressive glances, the way she listens to conversations as though secretly absorbing and recording. The turn of her head, the way it sits on her neck; the movement of her hands.

But he never had her to himself. There were always friends, or family, and of course, Freda.

Freda adored Sam and fussed over him almost as much as her mother.

- Sam, you'll never make a good soldier, just look at you! Your tie's all to one side, and how does your shirt get so crumpled?

- I sleep in it, Sam said.

- Well, it looks like it. Why don't you buy yourself a pair of pyjamas?

- I've got pyjamas, he replied, and hitched up his trouser leg to reveal striped flannelette underneath. There were several friends in the flat and they all collapsed with laughter.

- It's cold up north, said Sam defensively, - a lot colder than it is down here. We haven't any proper heating in our offices, we all sit huddled up with coats and scarves and as much underclothing as we can.

His friend George, who worked with him, said - It's all right, Freda, he does take his uniform off at night. He means he sleeps in it during the day when he's supposed to be working. -

- How do you know I'm not working, just because my eyes are closed? It's brainwork, after all. I think with my eyes closed.

- Please, Sam, Freda pleaded, - try to be smarter; take a bit of pride in your appearance.

- What for?

- You'll never get promotion. They'll think you're too untidy.

- The more time I spend on all that army nonsense, all that spit and polish stuff, the less time I have for doing what I think is interesting and important. So who cares about promotion, anyway? It's interesting, what I'm doing.

- Well, not for yourself. For Mama and Papa, it would mean so much to them.

- I can't spend my life concentrating on fulfilling their expectations.

In the night there were heavy raids, with bombs dropping close to where they lived. They took blankets and went down to the basement with the other occupants of the building. In this area filled with pipes, boilers and near strangers, Sam made a place for them both beside himself and tucked blankets around their legs.

- We're off to the parents tomorrow, Lucia, Freda said. - I hope you won't be working late. They expect you - you're part of the family now.

- I think it will be O.K.

The building rumbled and shook above them.

- It's wonderful for me, Lucia said, to be accepted into your family - to have a family. I envy you, that you grew up with so many people, that you belonged to them all.

- Ye - e- s, said Sam. - But it has its disadvantages.

- Such as --?

- Claustrophobia, Freda said flatly. - Nothing private. Everything commented on. If you change your hair style, wear something new - whatever - it's all assessed, weighed up, discussed. I couldn't go to the pictures with a boy, they all wanted to know everything, before anything had a chance to develop. Who his parents were, what did his father do . . .

- And if he was Jewish, of course, Sam intervened. They're pretty broad-minded, our parents, but the social pressures are very strong.

- But I'm not Jewish, said Lucia, and they've accepted me. I feel as though Freda's my sister, I couldn't feel closer to her than if she actually was my sister.

- You are my sister, said Freda.

Sam looked at Lucia. - But I don't want to be your brother, he said.

In a little while Freda was sleeping, and Sam held Lucia to him as the world shivered and shook around them, reverberating with the shocks of gunfire and bombs.

- What are you going to do when this is all over, Lucia? Sam asked.

- Oh, I don't know. I'm thinking about journalism. I like writing, I want to travel. I haven't worked it out yet.

- Freda tells me you write poetry.

- Yes.

- Will you let me see some of your poems?

- They're not very good.

- How do you know? Who told you?

- I told myself. I know. I read real poets . . .

- What's a real poet? Someone who's got into print?

- Well, if they're published, that means that their work has been evaluated and judged worth being published.

- Please, let me read the works of a not-so-real poet.

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Lucia did not really need Freda to tell her - Sam's awfully keen on you, you know; although she did challenge her - How do you know? Has he said anything to you?

- He doesn't have to say anything. Why do you think he's always finding excuses to come to London? Last time he told them he had to do some special research on the first World War, and needed to go to the Imperial Library, or some such place. And they fell for it! Oh, I daresay he does do some token research, once he's said he's going to. But before he met you, he didn't seem to have any reasons for coming to London often.

Should she let this situation develop? She was feeding greedily on the need for affection, but she had doubts about what she hoped the outcome might be.

Despite that, she thought of Sam a great deal, and was happy to see him. And when she thought of John, as she did involuntarily, but still often, it was with a sense of pervading sadness and regret. It was such a long time since she had last seen him or had any word from him. She wondered if he were still alive, if he had survived those punishing Atlantic convoys; or worse - if he had gone east on the terrible route to Murmansk. U-boats, packs of them, had continued to take a murderous toll of the convoys; he would, perhaps, not have survived the attacks from above and below.

Sometimes there were dreams of him; he was floating in the icy sea, face turned upwards, eyes closed; lifeless, touched and turned by the black waves, then vanishing into the enveloping darkness. His next of kin - his sister - she would know. But Lucia did not even know his sister's married name. Perhaps he had been right. How lonely and isolating it would have been to wait and wait, not even to know the extent of his caring.

Or he might simply have found someone else with whom to spend his leave. Yet there had been a powerful attraction between them; although this did not mean he could not change; look at herself and Sam.

When Sam next came to London and called at their flat, Lucia was out and did not come home until late. Freda told her that Sam had come, but had gone to see his parents.

Two days later a letter arrived from him. He said he would be in London again in a week's time, and would she be in, as he very much wanted to talk to her.

She showed the letter to Freda who exclaimed with surprise and delight - Why Lucia, I bet he's going to propose to you! How wonderful! I'll disappear tactfully when he comes and leave the field clear for you.

- It's not necessary. And how do you know what he intends, anyway?

- I know, I know my Sam. And I will go out, if not for your sake, then for his. He's my brother, after all.

He was very stiff and formal, which made Lucia awkward and shy. He made a fumbling little speech about this not being the time to form lasting relationships and how uncertain things were, speaking generally and also as far as his own particular future was concerned. This stirred a thought of John, but she put it away.

But Sam went on from there, saying that soon, he thought, he would have to go away and would probably be away from them all, a long way. And started to talk about what he wanted to do when the war was over, but this depended on so many factors . . . and tried to pick up the threads of what he had started saying by talking about how things happened when you least planned them and that you can't order human emotions and expect them to jump to heel like well-trained soldiers; it was not always possible to stifle or postpone one's deepest feelings . . .

His solemnity irritated her, his attempt at maintaining detachment and being intellectual about it all. She wanted to say to him, Oh for heaven's sake, stop making speeches, if you love me, say so. At least let me hear how it sounds.

Finally his speech trickled to an end. He who had never in the past been lost for words stood with his back to Lucia, humble and silent, looking out of the window.

She said at last - I don't know, Sam.

He turned to face her, waiting.

- I care about you very much, but I don't know about marrying you.

Whatever she wanted to say sounded to her false and familiar, as though the words had been read in many books. How can you say I'm very fond of you, but I don't know whether or not I'm in love with you? Once she had been so sure, if you fell in love you fell deeply, irrevocably, completely; fell as though into a hole or a pit. So she had 'fallen' for Chris. She had been happy with him. But given a different pattern of events, it might have been the soldier-lad Jimmy, it might have been someone else; it surely could have been John. And if she had fallen in love with Chris, she had as surely fallen out of love, and would not want to live with him again.

But Sam - to enjoy his company, to admire his character, to be stimulated by his intellect - was this the sum-total of being in love? What was missing?

Now he ceased playing the part of the lover proposing to his lady, and came to sit beside her in his unaffected, normal way.

- Are you not sure about getting married, or is it about marrying me?

We could try it out, couldn't we?

- A trial marriage? she asked.

- A marriage on trial.

- Give me a while, she said.

- As long as I can, he replied.

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No time. Sam going away soon to some unknown place. The accelerating pace of the war. The pilotless bombs that came without warning to eradicate houses, streets, places, people. Work that chained her all day, disrupted nights. Warmth, security on Sunday nights if she and Freda could make it to the suburbs. John a dream from the past. Sam an anchor for the present. So many shared interests, and a feeling of really caring for him, so why all this hesitation? What was she looking for? Did she still believe there should be a singing of violins?

She would write to him and say yes.

But in the night she said to Freda - I want to ask you. Do you think I should tell him?

- Tell him what?

- About Chris. About the abortion.

- What for?

- Isn't it only fair he should know?

- What for? Freda repeated.

- Because - well, not telling him is concealing an important part of my life. And we shouldn't have secrets, we should feel we can be honest with each other. Don't you think so?

- I don't see what you're getting at, Freda said vehemently, - I don't see the point of it. Do you expect him to tell you who he's slept with? Details of his affairs with other girls? Would you want to know?

- No, but it's different, isn't it? It wasn't just an affair, really. It's like hiding from him the fact that I've been married. It's equivalent to that.

- I think you just want to unburden your own guilty conscience on him -

- It's not guilt!

- And don't pretend to me that you haven't been consumed with guilt about the whole thing. How is it going to help either him or yourself, except to make you feel good because you confess and tell him everything? Leave him alone! It's your burden - don't try to fling it in his lap.

- I've always believed that if two people love each other they shouldn't have secrets. They should always be truthful.

- Oh, truthful! she exclaimed. - What is truth? The greatest love can be

based on deception, on things concealed because of love.

- What makes you such an expert on these things?

She laughed. - I'm not. I'm an expert in a theory I've never had the chance to practice. But it isn't just about love, Lucia, it's about how we relate to each other. What would any of us be like if we revealed to others all the fundamental truths, the secret thoughts?

- It's not revealing myself, it's telling about my past.

Freda said after a while - Women have a lot of secrets from men. It's their only weapon.

- I don't feel that I need to arm myself against Sam. He's the first man I've known who takes me as I am, not claiming to look after me, or to protect me, but just expecting that our lives will be shared. With Chris he ~~was~~^{is} always the guide, the leader, I was always under his tutelage. But in any case, there are practical difficulties.

- Such as?

- Well, my Aunt Hettie, for instance. One of these days I shall have to tell her that Chris and I have separated - divorced. And then almost immediately, if I tell her I'm going to get married again - if we do decide, well, sometime I must go and visit her and then: she might say something about my former marriage, or maybe not, but after all, there are others who would know. []

- Tell him about Chris, then, but leave it at that.

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Lucia had been working on a series of profiles of women in the war. They had originally been intended for publication in a weekly magazine, but it was decided that they should be broadcast.

The list of potential interviewees was endless: a woman working in a munitions factory that had been moved far from her home town; a woman doing precision engineering - and still only earning half the wage of men doing identical work (these sort of details were usually blue-pencilled before the piece went on the air), a woman doing immensely heavy physical work on the barrage balloons, a VAD nurse, a woman despatch rider who could service and repair her own motorcycle, women managing the searchlights, doing fire service, working as wireless operators, drivers, cooks, ambulance drivers.

Because she personalised the interviews, even if the names were changed, and let the women speak for themselves about their difficulties and triumphs, the broadcasts had a wide appeal.

She told Janet of some of her problems; of the things she could not write about. About women who had taught themselves to shoot, and others who had formed the Women's Home Defence Movement to learn how to handle weapons, although Churchill was adamant that women should not do military combat.

- They are so eager, she said, - so capable, it's absurd. They've already proved they can do anything that men can.

Janet had been sorting some material from the early days of the war.

- Look at this, she said: How to challenge an invader. And she read out:

Hands up! -- Hande hoch! (Henda hoch)

Hand over your weapons! -- Ubergaben sie ihr wuffen! (Ubergayben zee eerer vuffen)

and so on. What did they think, that the women would disarm the invaders brandishing a kitchen knife?

- But these women you are writing about - you realise that they won't be able to go back to what they were before the war? What's going to happen when all those men come back to all these women, the ones you write about? And find them strangers ?

- I think about them, Janet. You see, they will both have changed, the men as well as the women, but in different ways. The men will have endured all the terrible experiences of war, the death of their comrades; some will come back with lost limbs, lost mobility, lost sight, lost illusions, they'll be longing for the women they left behind, for them to be soft and

yielding, compliant women. And find strangers.

She thought about the women she had interviewed, women who had trained themselves to cope, to work long hours, do vital war work while they kept their homes going, or too often to keep their heads in emergencies, to cope with the destruction of their homes, the death of those close to them. The ones who had found new strengths and learned new skills, who would no longer wish to define themselves only in relation to the men in their lives; women for whom the giving of self would now demand a new response - the giving by the men.

She asked - What will you do after the war, Janet?

- Oh, me, I expect I'll go back to teaching, it's what I know best. And you?

- I'm not sure. Something to do with writing. Maybe I could try journalism. I'd like to be a poet. Only that's not a job, is it?

- Why not?

- You can't make a living at it. You have to work at something that other people regard as real work, and just be a poet in your spare time.

- In a way, she went on, - it's an awful thing to say, but the war's been good to me. I would still be typing and filing other peoples' letters if it wasn't for the war.

- I doubt it, Lucia. You might have taken longer to discover your talents but I'm sure you would have, in the end.

Yes, Lucia thought, but if I had still been with Chris, depending on him, learning from him, pleasing him? And she felt a strange shift in her emotions, so that the break-up of the relationship was no longer the terrible trauma that should never have happened, but something inevitable, that would have happened eventually in any case.

A few days later Janet said - I've a friend who's in the publishing business. He's very taken up with your 'profiles' and would like to publish them in book form. He was most intrigued to hear that I work with you. He wants to know if you would be prepared to do some work on them - expand them a bit, add a few more, that sort of thing, if he can arrange publication.

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It was the fourth Spring of the war. Warm, muggy warm in the heavy London manner. Yet on such afternoons an extraordinary beauty outside their windows. Trees, lawns, bushes, all filled with the multiple growth of twig and bud; crocuses covering those lawns not turned into allotments and the first forsythia spurting like golden fireworks.

Spring, and with it the coming of hope, the tides of disaster had turned. Beyond the accelerating combat into which, in one way or another, they were all drawn, they could begin to see the vistas of peace. They could begin to talk about the future.

Sam came to London infrequently, and they were almost never alone. They made the necessary concessions to the demands of his family, and Lucia knew she was letting herself drift on the waves of their 'understanding.' It's another kind of love, she told herself, for she valued the way Sam treated her; how he had made her conscious of her own worth, how he valued what she did, and did not expect her to change herself to meet his needs. With Chris whatever work she did was simply a way of supplementing their income, but had no validity in itself. Sam expected her to have her own work-life.

It was as though she had always been an empty vessel waiting for someone to come and fill her with love; and that she had sought to satisfy her longing for love with romantic ideas that had no existence in real life, only in novels or films, or the women's magazines.

There came a day when, on one of his now rare visits, they had asked some friends to the flat. All afternoon Sam had an air of self satisfaction as though he was hanging on to some pleasant secret. Until, during a pause in the conversation he remarked - Oh, I nearly forgot! I've something to show you, Lucia. And he pulled a magazine out of his pocket, turned over some pages, then handed it to her. - Read that, he said.

She saw some familiar words. Her eyes jumped to the foot of the page - her own name; then back. She read the two poems she had written, now in print in a literary magazine. She blushed and became confused. Not only Sam, but all the others as well, were watching her. Her defense was to attack him.

- Oh Sam! You didn't ask me! You had no right to take them - I only gave them to you to read, not to display all over the place.

- That's gratitude for you! Sam said. - She's on her way to fame and fortune because of me, and now she says I had no right to do it.

The others crowded round to read the poems. Sam said - I simply sent them in. They accepted them immediately; and they wrote back and asked for more. He handed Lucia a letter.

- Read them, read them, someone demanded.

Lucia said - No, no, I can't - please! No, it would sound so . . .

Then Sam took the magazine and said - I'll read them, if Lucia doesn't mind.

He read the poems in a quiet room. They sounded unfamiliar to Lucia, as they had looked unfamiliar in print; but still, they stirred her.

When he had finished there was silence for a moment, and he looked at her with a little smile that spoke of love, yes, but something else, pride, even admiration. Then she was submerged in the praise of her friends.

When they had gone he asked - You're not angry with me? I know your poems are very personal to you, but writing poetry, it's creative, how can you keep it to yourself? What you create, you must share.

- I'm very proud of you, Lucia, he said.

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He had a very brief week-end leave, that was to be the last for a long time. He arrived on Saturday in the late afternoon, and said that he had to leave again the next day before lunch.

Lucia said - It would be nice if we could go out to dinner tonight, wouldn't it?

- I'd love it, Lucia, Sam replied, but I'm afraid we simply must go and visit my folks. Mama would be so hurt if she knew I had been here but hadn't come to see her. And besides, I must go and show her this -

This was promotion - Simply for reasons of convenience, he explained to Lucia and Freda, because in the work he was doing he needed seniority over certain of the other personnel, they had made him a major.

- You'll be the scruffiest officer in the whole British forces, Freda said. - You are one of those individuals who have the knack of reducing the smartest clothes to a state of disorder simply by putting them on. You're totally undisciplined - look at your hair!

There could be no chance for them to be alone. In his parents' home there was much talk and excitement and preparations for the meal, and telephoning of aunts and uncles. - Barney? How are you? Would you like to come over tonight? Sam's here - they've made him a major. Yes, a major!

- Of course, it's got its advantages, Sam explained to Lucia. - You realise I get paid more now? Save, save! At least we'll start off with something.

They stayed overnight in the Lewis home, then went back to the flat for a couple of hours, and friends came. Then it was time for Sam to go.

Only then he had a chance to say to Lucia - I wanted so much to have a bit of time with you this weekend, just to ourselves, but it hasn't been possible.

Even as he spoke Freda was visible through the open door, washing up tea cups.

- I won't see you again for some time.

- You're going away?

He nodded. - It's a special unit - really what we are concerned about is preparation for when the fighting's over. I'm a chocolate soldier really, never anything as sordid as handling a gun except in the most rudimentary training. We have to start laying the basis now for our post-war world, for gmaking ready some sort of structure of government. You know, when the war's actually finished, the fighting part, I might have to stay in Europe for quite a time, but then you would be able to join me there. Would you mind that? It won't be the kind of travelling you've dreamed about, but still, it will be a different part of the world.

- I think I might . . .

- Would you? I'll come back as soon as I can, and we could get married right away. If you agree, I can tell my parents about it.

- I think your mother already guesses something, the little hints she is always giving me.

- She would.

They kissed goodbye, while Freda tactfully prolonged the washing up.

* * * *

That year life closed down on Lucia.

The raids on London had started again, reprisals for Allied air attacks on Berlin. People were exhausted now, and angrier, bitter at unnecessary restrictions and bureaucracy, drained by long years of unremitting work in harsh conditions. The brunt of the bombing fell on the centre of the city. One day a bomb killed children in a primary school, and one evening, while people were queueing for nightly shelter in Bethnal Green tube station, the sirens started a stampede for the stairs; 173 people were crushed to death.

There were sights now so familiar they were part of the scenery. Children rummaging in the rubble, not only, as they once had, for shell splinters, but for any salvageable items they could rescue and appropriate. Dark streets with empty houses brought more thieves who gathered like vultures on bombed-out shops or houses. The black market was flourishing and spivs waited for customers on street corners.

Lucia had become accustomed to streets thick with smoke, to the stench in the streets when the sewers had broken, to the wail of fire alarms and ambulances. She would pick her way through pavements strewn with the shards of glass, where shock waves had broken windows, stripped the leaves off trees, and left dead their smallest victims, the birds. She was used to the gaps, the rubble covered with fireweed in streets bombed years ago. She was familiar with those rows of houses where front walls had been stripped away - monstrous dolls' houses that opened up to reveal their beds, tables, chairs, wall-paper hanging in strips, stairs that led to nowhere. It was a partially-demolished city to which each day added new, instant ruins.

So she came home one late evening along those tattered streets to find the sky, close and cold, had become the roof of the building where she and Freda lived. Freda, who had been working the night before, had been asleep in the flat. They had just reached her when Lucia arrived, and as she lay on a stretcher, only semi-conscious, she kept saying over and over again - I must have my glasses. I can't see a thing without them. They were right next to me. I must have them.

There among the acrid rubble one of the men found them incredibly unbroken, and placed them in her hand. But she had multiple fractures of legs and an arm, and Lucia knew it would be a long time before they could live together again. When Freda had been taken away, she stood for a while feeling numb, and somehow most upset by the sight of their window-boxes, where they had been so carefully nurturing tomato plants,

reduced to rubble among the ruins. Then she went to Freda's house to break the news to her parents.

She stayed with them for a while, and they wanted her to stay, their link with both their son and their daughter. But the journey was too long and her work was too demanding. She found a basement flat in a terraced house in Chalk Farm, collecting and retrieving those possessions that had survived the bomb, gratefully accepting the contribution from the Lewis family - bed linen, cushions, crockery - and moved in.

Freda was taken to a hospital outside London. Lucia worked, she visited Freda when it was possible to make the journey, and had a meal once a week with the Lewis's, when she was not too exhausted to go there. That was all. Her life was now only her work, the rest was reduced and self-contained.

The day was alive as always with work, with people, voices, telephones, typewriters, the slam of doors, discussions and arguments. Perhaps the intensity of it all had lessened, but not so much that they were idle. But social life had become distanced; no more Freda to prepare food with at night and talk about the kind of day they had had; no more visits from Sam and friends; everyone scattered, absorbed by the demands of a struggle moving towards its climax. She had no inclination to take up the social life of the time before she met Freda and Sam; to go out dancing with strangers, to night clubs; she was no longer searching.

When she left her office at night the people with whom she had worked so closely and intensely all day were dispersed, dissolved into the unseeing streets; and she, too, became detached and single, wrestling with the key that always stuck in the door of her flat, closing the door behind her to enter a silent world removed from the reality outside. Unless it was a night of raids. Silent, small, lonely, living once more in a box.

The house above her had shrunk and become quiet too. When she had first moved in other families occupied the floors above her, but they had all left, and there was no one apart from herself in the basement and an old woman who lived on the floor above her and was totally deaf.

When the nights were silent, and often at weekends, it was as though the world had receded, become muffled and distant and obscure. Life died down, it reduced itself to the soft ticking of her clock, the silent pulsating of her heart. Life was suspended, held in abeyance, frozen. The voice of the news-reader entered her room at regular hours, and when she had listened to the news, her obliteration of the voice was marked by the click that meant a return to silence. Then she became aware once again of the insistent whispering of the clock, the gas fire flaring and falling to a whisper; book pages whispering as she turned them; or sheets of paper - the letters

she wrote to Sam, to Hettie or to Freda, the letters Sam wrote to her - whispering as they floated to the floor.

In bed, in the dark, the city and the war could go on outside and beyond her with its panic-sirens, its rumbling of planes and stuttering of guns, like the sounds of a war long past, already written into history. Her basement seemed more secure to her than the Anderson shelters in the little green square near her home; and the woman above her totally refused to go to the shelter; being deaf, she indicated, she did not mind if a bomb fell on her - she would be dead before she knew it was coming.

Between the intermittent and often distant echoes, the silence came in great waves, pouring through walls and closed windows in a tireless, evelasting flood. Sometimes it seemed her whole head was filled with white silence, that somehow there was only a hair-line border beyond which, if she crossed, she would be forever lost. To keep herself from drowning and dying in this white sea there was music, and music itself merged into the silence, burying and being buried by it, suspending and containing it, singing within her head as though it were inaudible to all but the skull itself, music, silence . . .

With you alone is excellence and peace,

Mankind made plausible, his purpose plain . . .

Music, silence, hammering at the heart, throbbing in the blood, pumped through her veins . . .

To the sound of music she penned her letters and with music the background she worked at the poems she was now preparing for a book. Music was the excuse, the solace, the justification, gathering up all the mistakes of the past, all the vast sorrows that flayed the world; changing and transforming, changing and renewing. Music spoke to her of separation and loss and death; and of discovery and life and hope. Music and poetry her ramparts, her dreams and her reality, her fulfilment and her peace.

Particularly when she played the records that he had loved, she would think of John, although thoughts of him were vague and distant as she had now not seen him for a long time. And she would wonder if he had survived, and if he ever listened to the same music. Or perhaps could hear it in his head as his ship ploughed through stormy seas. She had never been able to picture him on his ship in calm weather. It had to be stormy, the ship dipping and reeling under the blows of monstrous waves, spray flying. But he, too, had become reduced in her mind, remote from her life, For on his insistence he had taken no place.

Yet the day came when, arriving back from lunch, she found a note on her desk left by the telephonist. Someone called John phoned and said if you are not married yet, perhaps you would call him back at the Westcott Hotel.

She could not contain the leap of her heart; joy that he had survived. But then the thought of seeing him, picking up that strand - what was the point? So she screwed the note up and threw it away.

And could not forget it. She thought about him the whole afternoon, just to know how he is, if everything is all right . . . why not? He makes no demands, he requires nothing other than a few hours of company, and promises nothing. How marvellous it would be to go out with a man again, with John; to have John to talk to, to have him looking at her . . .

She retrieved the note and read it again, and phoned the hotel.

He said - How nice of you to bother to phone me. I suppose you wouldn't be free this evening, by any chance? I'm at a loose end, and London's too big and intimidating for a country hick like me.

They arranged to meet at a restaurant called Pirelli's.

She had to work later than she had expected, and rushed back to her flat, jerking around like an animated puppet trying to decide what to wear. There was not much choice; her clothes, like everybody else's, were old and shabby. She seized a hairbrush, gave her hair a few strokes, put the brush down, opened a disordered drawer and scratched around to find the remains of some perfume in an old bottle; tried tying and untying a scarf around her head, her neck, flinging it onto the bed, glancing at the time, seizing her raincoat and handbag, getting as far as the door, rushing back and grabbing the discarded scarf, then out into the street.

She told herself, it's not because it's John, it's because I just haven't been out with anyone for such a long time, it's like a treat. She did not think Sam would have minded if she went out with other men from time to time; she had not done so partly because she had lost interest in the whole process of forming new relationships when they were doomed to a dead end; and partly because of work and war weariness. With John, it was different.

When she arrived at Pirelli's, cheeks flushed with tearing through the night, she was a few minutes early. He had not yet arrived, and she felt a momentary pang of disappointment. She had pictured herself walking in, and John, waiting for her, rising to meet her, eager, attractive.

In a corner near a potted palm she found a seat and fumbled in her handbag for a small mirror. The impulse to find the mirror, to examine her face in it, was propelled not so much by vanity as by the need to do something other than sit and look blankly around. Taking out a cigarette, lighting it, leaning back and blowing out smoke admirably filled such a purpose. She had watched other women doing it, but Lucia did not smoke.

As she lifted out the mirror she became aware that he was standing in front of her.

He looked thinner, paler, than she remembered. Older, too.

He said, very formally: - It was good of you to come at such short notice. I was really feeling desparate.

- Why - how long have you been in London?

- A few days.

- Why didn't you phone me before, then?

- Oh, I didn't know if I would be able to locate you after such a long time; or if you would be interested in meeting me again; or if you were perhaps married. Tell me, how is it that you're not married?

- I'm waiting for the war to end. I'm planning it - then.

They went into the dining room of the restaurant together. He was awkward and withdrawn, and she was uncomfortable. He felt like a stranger. Of course, she thought, he is a stranger.

He said - Lucia, you haven't changed at all. I thought about you so often, and just the way I remembered you - that's the way you are.

He added, his face beginning to relax - Better than I remembered.

- You have changed, she said, then without thinking - have you been ill?

- Well, I've been out of action for rather a long time. We were torpedoed. Our ship went down too quickly. So many were lost, our Captain too. Some of us were picked up, but the ship that rescued us struck a mine. I suppose I drew a lucky number, if you can call it that, if you think what has happened to so many others. I got myself rescued again, but it was a bad time; some injuries. I was in hospital for a while, then convalescing. Now I'm all right again.

- Is that what they gave you that for? She indicated the oak-leaf emblem that signified 'mentioned in despatches.'

- Actually that came earlier on. I get something else for being fortunate enough to survive.

- I wish you had got in touch with me. I'm an expert at visiting people in hospitals. She told him about Freda.

They ordered food, but the evening was not fulfilling her expectations. They seemed to have too little to say to each other after such a long separation, and John was under some constraint. His conversation reduced itself to a few words on each subject, then ended abruptly in silence. Finally she asked him - What will you do after the war? Carry on at sea?

He shook his head. - No, I've made up my mind about that. I've had enough of it.

- What then?

- I want to go back to school and get an education. If necessary I'll take any kind of job, digging roads, labouring, anything, so that I can study.

- And then what?

- I'm not sure. I rather like the idea of teaching. So you see - looking at her - I'll be pretty old before I can earn a decent living.

There he was, warning her again, telling her not to entertain any false ideas about their relationship. She was irritated, and remained silent.

They danced a little on a tiny square of floor, a patch cleared between the tables. She felt his arm around her, a man's arm, and began to relax, to feel attractive. The pleasure of being held by a man; her body felt light, her head a little light. Just the soft, sentimental music, the sensuous movement, was able to change her feelings, to iron out the awkwardness. She began to sing quietly the words of the dance tune, then stopped and asked - And music? Has it a place in your plans?

- That's one of the things I ³want to study, but that would be more in the nature of a hobby. I'm too old to entertain any hopes of taking it up seriously. Two days ago I went to the lunch-hour concert at the National Gallery. Myra Hess. It was packed. I wish you had been there with me. It's so difficult to describe one's feelings at such times, but it was as though the whole audience felt as I did, that this is what we all wanted, the way the world should be. And that we wanted to live to try and bring it about, and the stirring of hope that now it was going to happen.

- Would you like to listen to some music now? Come back to my flat. I salvaged some records from the bomb; a lot of them were smashed, but I've managed to get some new ones.

In the flat she put on the New World Symphony while she went to make some coffee - a small precious hoard that Sam had been given by the Americans with whom he was working. When she went back into the room John was sitting with his eyes closed; the tenseness had gone from his face; it was more like the face she remembered.

He smiled. She turned down the lights and turned up the music, talking only intermittently between one record and the next.

On the floor, kneeling close together, sorting out records, turning them over, reading the sleeves, their arms touched and at last she felt that this reserved and controlled man was melting, looking at her as someone whose feelings were going beyond those of the conventions of a pleasant evening together. She thought of Sam, and told herself to keep John at arm's length. But their eyes had met with this new awareness, and she felt uncertain and sad. She wanted to give him something to soothe, to compensate, to alleviate.

Yet she must, she had to, stay uninvolved.

She knew he should go. And she wanted him to stay.

- Is there really someone to whom you are to be married?

She nodded her head.

He touched her hand, holding it for a moment. - Then why don't you wear a ring?

- An engagement ring?

- Yes.

- I don't believe in them. We will get married, or we won't. But we don't need a diamond ring to satisfy my vanity.

- Surely it's not for that? It's a way of telling the world that you are, as it were, bespoken. To warn off predators like me.

- Then the man must wear one too. Why just the woman?

- I don't know. Perhaps because it's the man who makes the advances, so the ring is a kind of warning - keep off! I'm pledged!

- I don't think you're right, she told him. - Women do just as much hunting and chasing as men. It's like playing a chess game, and as often as not it's the woman who says 'checkmate.'

He smiled at her. - I'm still conditioned by these old attitudes. No one has ever challenged them to me before. You'll have to teach me.

She rose to change the record. She turned off the light and drew back the curtains to let in moonlight.

- Won't the music disturb people? he asked.

- We're all alone here. There's no one else in this building except the lady who lives upstairs; she's totally deaf. There's no one else.

We are alone here. We are two people removed for a little while from the rest of the world, concerned only with ourselves and our interaction on each other. He came and stood behind her.

He said - Lucia, I was wrong, you know, and I've been wanting so much to tell you. I didn't know how to. What I said once about people marrying in wartime. I found out . . . I found out that I was afraid of being afraid, afraid of having someone I loved waiting for me. I thought it would make me cowardly and want to avoid death. But when I was confronted with the reality, it became reversed. I was sure at one time I would not survive, and I was consumed with regret for so much of my life not lived. It seemed to me then that what I had been afraid of all along was not of dying, but of living.

He thought again of the night they were torpedoed, a night of bitter, unrelenting cold, not far off the coast of Iceland. Half the ship was blown away and there was time only to launch two rafts. Those not killed in the explosion could barely leap into the sea towards them before they saw

their ship disappear. They were packed together on the overloaded rafts; the sickening, too familiar stench of oil rose up and in the water around them the bobbing red lights of the men swimming around, trying to reach the rafts, while the waves struck oil into their mouths, their nostrils, into their lungs. As the deadly cold numbed them, the cries of those in the sea and clinging to the ropes lessened, their limbs losing feeling, their lungs choked with oil.

And he remembered again how they began to die, some silently, their blood freezing, some crying out with cramps, some without even knowing when they loosened their grasp on the ropes and slipped silently into death from one moment to the next.

Those who died on the raft they slipped into the sea to make more room for the living.

When the reluctant light finally came it revealed two groups of men, oil-soaked and blackened, shivering as the icy waters slapped at the rafts; and across the fouled and oily water were the still bobbing corpses of those who had died in the night. He felt that the only reason he had managed not to die was the strong sense of duty, of responsibility to the other men on the rafts who were now his charge.

He said to Lucia - I held one ^{hand} in my arms, I felt that if I held him close he would get some life from me, but he slipped away. I hated him when he was dying. I was angry with him, anger not pity, he had no right to die and leave me living. After that it seemed to me that I, too, would soon be dead and there would be no one to mourn me. I wanted to be remembered. You were right, you see, if you had been waiting for me I knew that if I died you would know grief, but later you would remember me as someone from a distant time. When you're dead, you're dead. There are only peoples' memories of you. I so much wanted that memorial. I saw you all through that night, Lucia.

She said - In a way, I did wait for you, but . . .

- But - ?

She took a deep breath to control her voice. - But to wait - for what?

The moon, obliterated by clouds, emerged as though it was sailing swiftly through them.

- Remember, she said, - They beauty haunts me heart and soul . . . -

- Lucia, am I too late? Can't we start again, from here?

He was waiting for her to say, - It's not too late.

But she stood looking out of the window, so that she did not have to face him. Sam trusts me. - Yes, she said, - it's always too late.

Distantly the sirens began to wail. Then she turned, - Don't go, she said, - stay here.

He looked at her doubtfully. - Do you mean that? After what she had said, it was not clear what she meant. He glanced at the sofa. I haven't pyjamas, a razor, anything.

- I'll lend you one. Look -

She walked into the bathroom, and he followed. From the medicine cabinet she took a small razor. - You can use this.

He took it in his hand and looked at it. - What on earth do you use this for? It's so small.

- I use it to shave under my arms. But it's got a new blade. You can use it.

In the confined space of the tiny bathroom, desire flamed. He put the razor down and turned to the door. - I think I had better go back to the hotel, Lucia; thanks all the same.

She hated him for his reticence, for his control. She turned away with a little shrug and said coldly - Do as you wish.

He stood beside her. He said, softly and pleadingly, so that she turned towards him - Lucia, you understand why I don't want to stay?

She shook her head.

- You must understand it, he said, - I couldn't stand it, having you so close. Unless. . .

For the last time that evening she evoked clearly the image of Sam. She asked him for understanding and forgiveness. He had so much trust in her. She said mentally, Sam, I will stay true to you - in my fashion.

Then all hesitation and annoyance had gone and she stopped prevaricating.

- Sleep with me, John, she asked him.

- Oh god, Lucia --

- Just for tonight. Nothing more.

- You mean it? You are sure?

- Oh yes, very sure.

She wanted to let him have this gift of self. She wanted to give herself to him as a solace, as an act of love. He took her face in his hands and began to kiss her in the way she had always wanted him too, with a released passion. She felt his need of her, and her unreluctant need of him.

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He was more shy than she would have expected from a man who seemed so sophisticated and worldly; until she realised that he had spent the greater part of his adult life completely cut off from contact with women, his experience perhaps confined to the commercial and impersonal encounters in various ports. But once having taken her decision, once having set all her feelings of guilt on one side, she was determined to make him happy.

She told him to get undressed first, and when he came out of the bathroom, a towel modestly draped round his waist, she said - You get into bed while I'm washing.

So he was waiting for her when she came out, letting her wrap fall to the ground. It won't always be like this, my shapely body, my upright breasts, my smooth unmarked skin, but tonight we are the personification of lovers.

Moonlight poured through the window and bathed them both in its remote light. John, beautiful John, with splendid planes to his face and a firm strong body. She fléet for him and her face burned with his kisses and his desire. She clung to him as though she could dissolve herself in him, and in the enfolding shadows she lost any sense of identity and became nothing more than a female body open and receptive and moving beneath him, while he, too, thrusting himself upon her, beating himself into her, had become the embodiment of the sexual act as an act of love.

But so quickly that she hadrly realised what had happened, it was all over. He lay breathing like someone who has run a race and between intakes of his breathing he murmured over and over again - I'm sorry, oh Lucia, oh my darling, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

She felt then for him as she had never felt for Chris, as perhaps she would never feel for Sam, an immense tenderness and compassion; and love.

She stroked his face, his hair. She held his head close to her and kissed his eyes, his lips. - It doesn't matter, she said, - really, it doesn't matter. And she wanted to weep with her love of him, and her pity, and her regret.

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Dawn comes before either of them sleep. They talk and make love for those few hours of night; and it is better after the first time. In any case, Lucia thinks, I would dissimulate for him, I would conceal weariness, discomfort, I would respond as he needs me to respond. This is my gift to him, and in return I want nothing but to feel him close and see his smile.

They sleep late into the morning. She ceases to care about everything else. She will make some excuse, telephone the Ministry later; she has never taken off time before. She wants the day to slide on in its own way. Silently, while he is still sleeping, she rises and washes and makes some coffee. When it is ready she puts on a record and lets the music wake him.

She sits on the edge of the bed and watches him stir and turn, watches his face as he tries to adjust to the music and strange bed, sees the loving transformation when he smiles, his hand flung out to touch her.

- I thought I must have died and reached paradise, he says. - The sound of music, the smell of coffee, and you - that is paradise.

He reaches for her, kissing her hair, her face, her breasts. As though to memorise it, she touches every part of him, his face, his body, his limbs. At first they are both overwhelmed by the tenderness they feel, but soon it is the passionate intensity of their mutual need.

Later they dress, and he wrestles with the miniature razor while they discuss what they will do. There does not seem to be anything important enough in the few hours they have together, but all they really want is just to be together.

They go out, so she can phone her excuses. It is cloudy when they leave the flat and then the sun comes out. They climb the hill beneath a radiant sky and watch the clouds scudding over all London. St Pauls is quite clearly visible from where they stand, miraculously, for it is surrounded by so much devastation.

Then they walk together, and talk about their work. She tells him of some of the things she has written, and so many that she was not permitted to write, that those who did not endure it could not have guessed. He tells her of some of the men with whom he has lived so intimately, and of the Captain of their corvette who was lost with the ship. She tells him a little of the Lewis's, of how she and Freda played tennis together when they were young, and came together again so accidentally - just another ten minutes in her office, just a few yards further up the platform . . .

All the time she is thinking that there will never again be happiness like this happiness of being close to him. They will never quarrel, never grow tired of each other, never be bored, because there is only this time, and this time will be all time.

They lunch in a pub on sandwiches and beer and go out again into the greying afternoon. The sun disappears. It is getting near to the time when he must go. They walk slowly and silently now in the ~~d~~iminishing light. The rain spills down on them dense and hard. They stand together in the shelter of a doorway while the curtain of rain obscures all else. He says at last what he should have said so long ago, what she can no longer bear to

hear. He says, - Lucia, Lucia, I love you. She feels as though she is suffocating. Tears join the rain on her face.

He says - I had decided I must not see you again. But I couldn't stop thinking of you. I thought I would just walk past the flat where you used to live, and then perhaps I might go up and just see if you were there. And when I got there, there was nothing. A great gap in the street, weeds already growing, as though it had all been razed a long time ago, as though you were long dead.

- And it was then that I knew - everything that had happened, the war, the convoys, the ghastly deaths, the loss of so many, of so much - it all became meaningless. I wanted to be struck with blindness or with death, because I thought you were dead.

- I remembered what you had said that first night we met, that it could be those of you here at home who might become the casualties of war, just as much as those who were doing the actual fighting. You had gone, and I had survived. What for? I wanted something of you to hold, to be a remembrance, as I had wanted to be remembered. There was just this great pile of bricks and rubble, weeds shooting up everywhere.

She says - I don't want you to say any more. Please, please, don't say any more.

But he must speak. - Lucia, I'll get a job after the war. I'll be back now, I know it, I'm convinced I will survive, and I want to so much. I'll get work. I know I haven't the right --

- No, you haven't any right! she interjects fiercely, - don't speak, don't say it! I don't want you to say it!

- But you must let me --

- No, no, no! she cries at him, - It's too late. Don't you understand? It's too late! It's too late!

She weeps with her face held against his coat. She is in the grip of a conflict for which there is no resolution save renunciation. She is shaken by her sobs, she will not look at him, nor let him look at her. She wants to run from him and never see him, never have to look at his face again. She wants to run through the rain and forget that he ever existed.

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When he leaves, she goes back to her flat and closes her door on the world. In the pocket of her coat is the paper on which John has written his naval address and that of his sister in Cheltenham. The door is still ajar, somehow she must find the will to close it.

She puts on a record of the Apassionata. She plays it over and over again, the sound turned up as high as it will go. She plays it until her heart and her mind become completely empty, until she can contain nothing, no pain, no loss, no thoughts of him, only the music pounding and singing through the darkening room, only the music, as though her body itself is the orchestra from which it comes.

She sleeps, and wakes strangely thinking about her mother. She thinks how her father had gone away, and how she had let him, and remembers how for so long she wanted to go to her and ask her the one simple question, the question that had never been resolved: Why did you never go to him? Tell me the truth. Tell me why you cried over the envelopes that came, why you kept them all those years, empty envelopes, the sum total, the whole of your life's loving for a man?

Quite clearly now she knows that there is no complete answer. She realises at last what she had not thought of before, that Rose would not answer because she could not answer, because she herself did not know the reason, or if she had once thought she knew, it was so long ago that the memory of it would be confused with all that had happened after; or because there were many reasons, all woven together, not the least of these being the pattern of her own childhood, her own ignorance, mistakes, illusions. Perhaps it was pride, as Freda had suggested, perhaps she too had wanted to be more than just a wife trailing around after her husband.

But love demands sacrifice. Perhaps she was afraid, fearful of what she might lose. Love entails loss. Perhaps she did not have the capacity to love enough. Love means giving of self.

It does not matter any more. The time has come when it is not possible to link lovers any more who have become strangers across the irremediable past. And that time will come for me too, she thinks, so that when I remember him it will be as a dream long receded, a dream discerned for one flashing moment of the impossible, of the romantic, passionate, perfect love, glimpsed for just a moment through the interstices of human relationships.

She draws the curtains back and opens the window. And there are the gulls, wheeling and turning in their clamourous rings, wings white as spray, scimitar beaks. Oh why are they so afraid of the sea?

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