

Late in Life

‘Eating figs is different for girls.’ She says this because she is being sexy for him to pass their time: standing in a queue and over-gently, over-carefully setting her lips to the fig, destroying it in an affectionate way. The round blush and kiss of the skin, the neat, small burden in her hand: she’s aware it all makes for a less subtle show than he generally likes, but he’s watching, he is now-and-then watching. And he gives her the quiet rise of what would be a smile if he allowed it. She knows this because she knows him and his habits and the way the colour in his eyes can deepen when he’s glad, can be nearly purple with feeling glad when nothing else about him shows a heat of any kind.

He’s quite frequently secretive. They have decided to like this about him. His love of hiding has nothing to do with her and should not be a worry – it dates from much earlier situations which were unpleasant. They agree that his varieties of absence are okay and usually endearing.

He nudges against her side, ‘Shush.’ This is a suggestion that she should hide, too.

She keeps on, though. ‘There’s one left, if you want.’ This morning she’ll be obvious for him and minutely brave.

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She will undermine the calm of their nearest building-society branch with an outbreak of sex, or something not unlike it. ‘Do you want?’ What she wants is for other people to overhear her. Anyone, she feels safe to assume, can need the comfort of witnesses sometimes and to be remembered, on the record. ‘I bought two.’ At the moment, she would appreciate some comfort.

‘Of course. You would.’ His mouth flinching into happiness and then back. ‘They’re better in pairs. At least, we’d hope so.’

She bites. This doesn’t honestly feel intimate any longer, only both interesting and wrong. If she were being accurate inside her little display, then she would simply warm and hold and be very kind to the figs. They would come to no harm. She would dote upon each of them in detail.

Instead, she is biting, eating.

Which may not seem arousing at all.

Maybe, from his point of view, she’s acting out a threat. Not that he doesn’t enjoy certain types of threat and the odder edges of sweet things. She has found she enjoys them with him – it’s not that she has to pretend.

He nudges again, ‘You couldn’t have bought me an apple . . .?’

‘You didn’t ask.’

‘I like apples.’

‘I couldn’t give you an apple – *woman inflicts apple on her partner* – it would be religious. Like a moral assault.’

They don’t assault, not ever. That’s a promise.

He nods solemnly, ‘Leading me astray again.’

‘No.’

As a couple, they are purely soft – hard ideas, but tender

application. Hardness was before, in all the years before they met, and they have declared an end to it.

‘We should get a garden.’ He stares past her and on into where he intends they should finally be. ‘Then we’ll grow apples. Figs, if you’d like. If the weather will allow. How about that?’ With a brief touch to her neck, an enquiring contact.

It is not an impossible hope: they could soon plant a garden and shape it to be only theirs. After today – or before 5 p.m. tomorrow at the latest – she will have paid off her mortgage. Or rather, he will have paid off her mortgage, because he’s *not short of cash* and had paid off his own decades ago, both of these circumstances slightly having to do with his age. Once they have sold her flat and his, they will move in together, more together than they currently are. They will buy – to be accurate, he will probably buy – a big new bed and sheets and everything fresh. They have planned this, pondered thread-counts and headboards, and they are sure they will sleep very beautifully once their requirements have been fulfilled. And they will also be there with each other and stay attractively awake. This means that when she reaches the head of the queue, she will be, in a way, receiving money for sexual reasons from an older man.

Hence the figs.

The money-for-sex thing feels mildly electric in the soles of her feet. She grins.

‘What?’ He kisses the top of her head. ‘Why’s the girl smiling? Or shouldn’t I ask.’ But he wants it out loud, she can tell: a further demonstration for the queue – *here’s love, here’s being desired and desiring, here’s assured love*. Something else they share: a need to be as real as observers

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make them. When she hugs his arm, she can feel it tensing with his usual interior argument – that he'd like to be the unnoticed man, the invisible boy who is shy – that he'd like to burn and be uncovered and holding and licking where they stand, outrageous evidence. 'Shouldn't I ask?'

'You should always ask.' Still, she isn't absolutely clear what she should answer. 'My boy should always ask.' This quiet and for him, no one else.

She doesn't believe that when he chooses to be overt he's making a statement against decay: bridge in his top teeth, glasses, greying hair – greyed, to be truthful – thin at the crown. He's not any more needy than she is, she completely believes that and has said so.

'Then tell me why you're happy?' Shining with the answers he expects and with being content, a young kind of content.

The truth would be complicated, so she tells him, 'I was just thinking – what if there was a hold-up, robbers, guns?' And for a moment she has made him disappointed.

But then fully, plainly, he permits himself to be delighted. 'If there were guns I would save you.' There is no way to overestimate how fond he is of saving, of the thought that he will do her good.

So, once again, she's vindicated: she doesn't ever lie to him unless it's for the best.

Under her hand, his elbow twitches with a dream of motion. 'I'd have to rush in and defend you from the bullets – stand in their way.'

'No. I'd take a bullet for you.' This is a whole, uncomplicated truth. She would be murdered for his sake, if necessary.

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‘No, no.’ He kisses this close beside her, nuzzles against their rush to be dead for each other. ‘I’d be compelled to do the gentlemanly thing and lay down my life. It would be instinctive. Men of my generation can’t help it. I would have to be terribly harmed and then expire.’

‘In my arms?’

‘Well, that would depend. If I was flinging myself at a gunman in a hail of hot lead I might not also be able to fall back and rest my head upon your shoulder.’

‘Breast.’

‘I’d be too poorly.’ A dark and nice flicker in his look.

‘It’s traditional.’

‘All right. Breast.’ Saying this with enough focus to make himself swallow, pause. ‘And if I failed to reach you, I would fail nobly and you would be impressed and you’d . . . then you’d probably – I don’t know – you could lever me into position before I kicked off . . .’

They do this a lot: imagining dreadful scenarios. It is a kind of inoculation against the future. She makes sure she doesn’t think of blood seeping through her blouse, or of the precise shape, warm and clever shape, the kind shape of his head, and how things would be if he wasn’t breathing and his lips were still.

‘What should I wear at your funeral?’

‘Velvet. Vermilion. No. Crimson. If you wouldn’t mind.’

‘That’s the same thing.’

‘Not at all. Crimson’s more blue and vermilion’s more orange. I think . . . And crimson’s spelled differently – it has a “c” in it. Like all the good things.’

‘Vermilion Velvet sounds better.’

‘Well, you’re not wrong . . . I shall leave it up to you.’

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‘Okay.’ She holds his hand. ‘And will I jump into the grave and call your name and be devastated and inconsolable?’

‘You’d spoil your dress.’

‘I wouldn’t care.’

‘All right, then. I’ll be in my box and I’ll listen. As far as I’m able.’

‘I will beat my tiny fists on the wood.’

‘Thank you.’

They squeeze each other’s fingers.

Ahead in the queue is a mother with a toddler daughter: all curls and frills and graded shades of pink. The girl has collected a leaf at some point, perhaps in her garden – the child’s family may have a garden – or else during the walk to get here. Up until five minutes ago, the thing was a perfect little autumn in her hand, crisp-edged and tawny. The girl has loved it into splinters since then. She is currently staring at her palm and how it is dirty with veins and shreds, although she doesn’t cry. Perhaps she has a philosophical turn of mind. Either that or she doesn’t yet understand her loss.

He clears his throat, ‘I’ve chosen the music.’

‘For what?’

‘For the wake. And the service.’

These occasions are only guesses and are so far away and distant and tiny that they can seem fun. And people of all ages joke about their funerals, pick tunes.

‘You’ll have Andrew Lloyd Webber and like it. Sea shanties round the coffin and then I’ll play the spoons.’

‘I’ll come back and haunt you if you do. I’ll come back and bite you.’

‘Why else d’you think I’d do it?’

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A student of the wandering sort shuffles past, his business concluded, and heads for the rest of the world. He seems exactly as bewildered as he did when he drifted up to make his enquiry.

Young men are easily confused, she's often thought this. They lack resources.

The building society is busy. There are nine strangers – including the toddler – straggled out between her and the end of her mortgage and then the probable garden with pre-existing, or easily purchased, trees.

Or maybe they'll change their minds and want decking with some pots – less work. Sit out of an evening and sip Martinis, daiquiris, home-made lemonade, and nobody doing their back in with mowing the lawn because there isn't one.

It doesn't do to over-prepare. She realises that it's good to let some mysteries remain.

Flower beds, or pots, or runner beans – it doesn't matter.

The woman ahead of her looks stressed and is holding a sheaf of ill-kempt papers. Whatever her problem is, it will take a while.

Monday lunchtime.

Predictably busy.

They should have known better.

There's the second fig to eat, yet – a distraction – except that it's his, intended for him. Not that she's asked if he likes figs. She made the assumption that he should because their tastes have been consistently in agreement right from their start.

It's something to give him, a fresh fig.

She doesn't want his money. She isn't truly accepting a

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gift, she is agreeing that he has to save her and embracing that. Anything else would hurt him.

And she can't hurt him.

Without his intervention – although this isn't what it's about, or what they're about – her mortgage interest would tick and tick, asking £6.80 from her every day. Plus, her inadequate mortgage endowment is shrinking and shrinking, which loses her – by some unhappy coincidence – pretty much another £6.80 every day. In this area, and several others, it can seem that she is being punished for something unnamed: perhaps sins she is waiting to commit.

He has lately been very firm that she ought to get rid of her flat and she agrees. The place has become unreliable. There is something wrong, for example, with the roof. People move unaccountably in and out. Most mornings, when she checks the table in the hall, there is mail for entirely theoretical residents. Yesterday there was a letter addressed to 'Mr Basement'. She isn't aware of anyone using that name. Odd objects are left on the steps during the night: pieces of metal, old mops, plastic things that seem culinary, or else medical. There is a sense of illicit activities taking place. Meanwhile, and perhaps in response, the council has sent notices to say that odd objects will no longer be uplifted, or that they will not be uplifted so often as hitherto, or that they will be uplifted from other locations, as yet unclear.

'The council are turning off the street lights.' He does this occasionally: follows her thinking while it runs inside. 'This winter.'

'Really?' It's generally a thing to love: the way he is mixed in her thinking.

'Said so in the paper. To save money.'

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‘Can they do that?’

‘Apparently.’ He lifts her hand, which means he intends to kiss it and – *here* – does so, as if she were delicate fruit, the touch light as a breath and elongating. ‘We needn’t go out any more in the nights.’ This hot between her knuckles, before he raises up his head and stares. ‘We could stop in and have lanterns and a fire.’ A blue and inquisitive stare. ‘Do you think we’d enjoy that?’

‘I’ve never seen you in firelight.’ As if she has a list of ways in which she would like to see him: in dappled sunshine, or a CT scan, perhaps in evening dress, or else a movie of the 1930s with a railway platform underneath him and leather luggage and a hat. In school, at his first job, with his first love – so much she has missed.

‘We’ll make sure we have a fireplace. Garden and a fireplace. And then we’ll get ourselves in firelight.’

‘On a rug.’

‘On a big rug.’

She can’t deny this curiosity, this ache to have felt his earliest kiss, his potentially scared or possibly reckless activity when no one had ever been with him, or left him. Imagination is inadequate.

Asking him – *show me your past, let me have it* – could be misunderstood. She doesn’t want him to be the man she’s seen in photographs: Polaroid Christmases, dated clothes; that isn’t who she loves, or who makes her undoubtedly satisfied. At night and on their daytime occasions – celebratory occasions, in his study with the paperwork jolted and spilling occasions – then he is always new, as smooth and new as teenage nonsense and summer running, as the best kinds of games. His pacing has maybe changed from what

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it was – he rolls up in waves and then back, has pauses – but his truth is only young and in the present tense. It is important that she keeps him absolutely sure of this.

If he doubts, she convinces him. That's how it is and will be.

And each time he's reassured, he draws in slightly closer.

'How are you surviving?'

'Okay. How about you?'

They are solicitous in balanced but not identical situations. She asks how he is during illnesses, if political news has upset him, if they have quarrelled. He asks after love-making, if she's tired, if they have quarrelled. They quarrel mainly at great speed, so they can move on to enquiries and holding and being held and can have nothing wrong any more. They lean on the rise and fall of their ribs when the shouting's done, old trouble in the press of breath. As a rule, they don't like being scared without each other, not even if each other is what scared them.

This morning hasn't been frightening, not quite. They spent it with each other in a lawyer's office, going through unspilled paperwork so that their lives will be coordinated and tidy from hereon in.

She called it *the document* instead of *the will*. This made matters slightly confusing and so she changed to *my document* and *your document* and eventually everyone – all three of them – was *documenting*.

Afterwards, business over, he kissed her in the street – a grey building at his back with a grubby doorway, and so she closed her eyes while they hugged and therefore spared herself the ugliness. He kisses very well. On that occasion, he was particularly fine.

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Such an uncomfortable day, though. She would prefer if it were done.

But no need for worry.

No sense in making assumptions, or being bleak in advance.

There's no way to be certain of when anybody will leave.

After you.

In every doorway, without fail, he tells her.

That's what she wants.

After you.

Then at least she'd keep the whole rest of him and miss nothing else.

But he has to be the gentleman, can't help it.

No. After you.

Which wouldn't be right.

But neither is right.

Someone else having their apple trees, lighting unwatched fires.

And she isn't sure she'll manage, not in the end, doesn't see how she could, and she wishes she wasn't carrying this silly paper bag with the fig in it that she won't eat, can't eat. She wants to fold her arms, or put her hands in her pockets, she isn't clear which.

He settles his hand at the small of her back and then lets her swing and face him and see how he is weary and gently and sadly himself. 'Are you okay, though? Really?'

She doesn't ever lie to him unless it's for the best.

Baby Blue

What happened was that I got lost.
I swear to God.
I got mixed up and then was lost.

I didn't mean it. I didn't mean anything. I had, in fact, headed out on a jaunt, I might say if asked, so that I could skip meaning completely for a spell. I'd hopped on a plane to Over There, slipped out from the airport and into a brand-new Having A Break kind of city with hope in my heart for sustaining a speed consistently sufficient to outpace myself and every trace of significance.

There's no law against it.

Other than that, I had no intentions, not one in my head. I promise you. Truly.

And then in the hotel later that funny sleep caught me: the twitchy and messy unrest which comes after flight. A wrong sun was behind the curtains and my day had been knocked all westwards and stretched and my skin smelled frightened and of catering in confinement, bad catering, and also carried some harsh/sweet combination of scents that wasn't like me and wasn't something I could like. This despite having taken a bath as soon as I'd got to my room.

All the Rage

No one can win with long journeys: in every case, they precipitate bad bodily changes.

That's what I'd say. If asked.

That's what I'm saying.

I'd go on the record should I have to, although I won't. Why would I? To whom would this be of interest?

After the bath and the lying down and the discontent I woke up fifteen hours later raw-eyed. I'd got a headachy thirst as well – drank the whole big bottle of bedside mineral water, which I thought was free, but it turned out not.

What had roused me was the so, so quiet quietness – everywhere the broad silence which is the same in no matter which country and indicates snow. Even before I'd gone and checked the windows and worried I wasn't keeping up my pace, I already knew that, close around the outer walls, normality had been taken and this pale stasis was locked down in its place.

Same every time. One understands the symptoms, causes, and maybe refers internally for a moment to girlhood information about each individual flake being not quite the same as any another and having continually found this a source of disappointment when so many seem entirely the bloody same, just bland clumps and gobbets of cold. Not the miracles promised.

Because, of course, I continue to have an appetite for miracles promised, I stood and watched the whiteness dropping, fine and gentle, and wished them all well: not flakes, more a wavering dust, a disturbance barely visible in the blanked sky. This is the style of fall that doesn't seem it'll be a problem, but it's deceptive. The stuff doesn't stop and tenderly eats up your street, your views, and settles,

Baby Blue

and being out in it will make you end up cold – cold in the lungs – and still it keeps on and overwhelms and then the fun's gone.

There is usually fun at the start, I think. Snow makes the only wholesale change that human beings choose to tolerate. People embrace it.

We're an odd species, embracing ruined water, a gradually sifting possibility of disappearance. Some of us don't, I realise: those trying for specific ends and getting trapped away from them – making hospital trips, for example, contending with rural environments – residents of places held habitually under various things like winter, the effect of winter.

But city snowfalls conjure up simple delight. Often. More often than in the country. The older woman who comes and stays sometimes in the flat next door to mine, she adores it. Or, more properly, she demonstrates her adoration on behalf of someone else. That would be the best way to put it. *Oooh, la neige. Voilà. On peut faire les boules de neige.* One morning she was there on the front path with her bilingual grandkid looking up, or else with her she's-sodding-well-going-to-be-bilingual grandkid looking up – I don't know the woman, only to say *bonjour* to, and am unsure of her details – the grandkid looking and complete in wonder – beyond the *grand-mère* thing having been established, I can't recall exactly how, she's really a blank – this kid looking – pink outfit, so I presume a granddaughter, the nose visible and eyes, but not much else, which led to guessing – the bundled-cosy granddaughter looking up and widely about herself and breathless with the newly bright air and amazed by the strangeness lying and giving beneath

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her feet and the wonderful – *attention aux pieds!* – and the wonderful danger there, made fresh and lovely.

It was a great morning. I wouldn't swear to it having touched on fun, but it did feel clean. Or cleaned. Erased. Eradicated. I have an inordinate fondness for blank sheets.

Bright white and unbothered, that's what I like. A crisp domestic glare of cleanliness.

Love it.

Crave. I feel I can say I crave it.

I crave the potentially fraudulent kiss of fresh hotel sheets along limbs, even though the mattress beneath may be a nightmare of mites and skin cells, sweated into by strangers for several nasty reasons. It's a stupid thing to crave.

But I long for and choose to believe in the sharp linen. I allow it to give me confidence.

So here we have it.

Me standing by a foreign window on a valeted carpet, underfloor heat that's pleasing the bathmat, through in the bathroom where I'd have a shower soon – I had confidence.

Wash me in the water where you washed your dirty daughter and I shall be whiter than the snow.

I had a relative used to sing that.

Granddad. My grandfather sang it.

And, in addition, we have –

Kid standing and about to pitch in for a go at a laundered world. With her relative. Who maybe sings, perhaps French standards, favourites, Belgian show tunes, I couldn't say.

There's a type of confidence in both of them, too. There's noticeable faith.

Baby Blue

Sod that, though.

It's all nonsense.

We can forget about the plane and the hotel.

They didn't happen.

Or they did, but they're not relevant where we are.

We could also get rid of the snow.

It has no place in the current narrative.

The winter-sports granny is true, absolutely, and numerous hotels and aeroplanes and weathers have been parts of my life, but they don't belong in the story I'm telling you.

This didn't happen abroad – this thing that happened – this parcel of things that happened – and this also didn't happen on the morning of the grandmother – *Vous parlez Francais? Un peu?* – and the obliterating sky. I shouldn't begin with leaving her behind and a walk to the bus stop beside the park and seeing the narrow balances of bleach-work along tree limbs, frosted trunks, the fountain halted.

There wasn't a fountain.

There never has been.

I don't know why I added it.

I want to describe my genuine circumstances on the occasion in question, but I can't.

I don't remember a bus stop, a bus, a journey of that kind. I usually drive. There would have been parking and, before that, the customary instances of discourtesy, bits of waiting – I'm sure there must have been – only I had no idea they might be of importance and paid them no heed.

But I was neither in an alien country, nor suffering unusual conditions.

That rubbish isn't true.

All the Rage

I did get lost. True.

I was raw-eyed. True.

I had passed a shallow night holding on against a memory of altitude and claustrophobia. Doesn't everyone? True.

I was tired. Contributing factor.

I might have thought briefly about the bread rolls served on aeroplanes and how they're incredibly cold, as if they've been delivered straight from the screaming sub-zero outside. Wherever they've been kept is somewhere unnatural, unbearable.

I might have thought that.

I do wander. In my thinking.

I have the impression that – on the day I might prefer to recall more entirely – I'd loitered in several places once I'd reached the city centre. There was a café, a health-food store with bargains offered on useless supplements, as endorsed by celebrity photos, none of which were remotely trustworthy or familiar.

That's probably the case. I can rely on myself about these points.

And then I went into somewhere that sold clothes that I would find despicable and therefore preoccupying as I potted about, loathing bad seams and poor cuts and weird colours and cheering my mood with how horrible it might be if I were someone else with stridently different tastes, which would make anybody who saw me think I seemed dysfunctional and bizarre.

This was just a way to waste my time, not serious.

I was aware that, if I were someone else, I would have been pleased by the awful clothes and have bought something

Baby Blue

I'd feel was charming, or else have put it in mind as a possibility for later, a treat, and – either way – I'd have gone home satisfied. I did realise that at the time.

I don't habitually hate or mock strangers and what they might like.

Unless I'm depressed.

Then I do it because it's cheering, but not too much and I get it over quickly.

So the proper preamble to my story is a blur of avoided purchasing and raised spirits.

And after that I wound up in another shop and began to make a moderate mistake.

I'm not ashamed.

I'd say that now.

It was something I walked into and couldn't control. Like the weather. It was like an unexpected stroll in snow.

If I'd been, I'll suggest this again, some other person with other likes and dislikes and not myself, then what was, in this case, unique for me might have been an already long-established and fond habit and no sweat. In someone only a little removed from myself, that could have been the case.

It must have been cold in the street. I believe that my hands were hurting in my pockets. They scolded. That memory's inflexible. So I can assume that I dodged indoors quite blindly to borrow a touch of warmth. I've been known to do such things before, particularly lately. I no longer concentrate as I once did.

The shop assistant was immediately – **Can I help you?** – right close at my elbow and her tone weird as she continued – **You were looking for something particular?** – which I wasn't – and she was asking me as if she was somehow a

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caring professional: not a doctor, or a nurse exactly, but maybe a dental hygienist, or a top-price hairdresser. She was dragging along this atmosphere of support and expertise which she leaned against me like a rolled-up carpet – second-hand, dusty – and there was a top note she put across most of her words to imply she was a friend I should confide in, girls together and ice cream this evening with crying and new lip gloss.

Lip gloss makes me feel constricted. As did she.

And wearing mascara's like peering through a fence. Make-up is what one does for others, isn't it? One goes to trouble.

One says things, if only to one's self, like *I have gone to trouble for you*.

As if it's a trip to be made on somebody's behalf.

I have gone to trouble for you, so you don't have to. I brought you back this souvenir, it's a small box of difficulties. You needn't unwrap them at once.

The gist of this was there in my head at the time – ideas being held – and there were other matters present, too, forming contours underneath the thinking, like knees underneath a bedspread. The knees have implications, but you don't have to deal with them, or not at once.

The assistant continued – insistent assistant – **For a special occasion?** – and I was, it must have seemed, drifting in an exploratory way along racks and shelves and display stands packed with choice. The lighting was unsubtle, so I found my surroundings rich in detail.

I was somewhere like a very big grocer's – **For yourself?** – a supermarket – times change and why be furtive, I suppose – a supermarket full of sex. Not sex. Devices engineered

Baby Blue

– there was a lot of engineering – to mimic the effects of sex. Only devices – **For yourself?** – not costumes, or DVDs, or magazines, or books, or most of the things I'd expect to be in a sex shop, in as far as I'd never had expectations in that field and couldn't be sure, but must have surmised at some point. I surmise a great deal and at random. I did not intend to be there and yet there I was, nonetheless – **For yourself?** – and I had no answer. I'd halted in front of a bank of what were probably – definitely, now that I looked – fake vaginas and I couldn't answer – who would? – that, no, I intended to buy such a thing for someone else. Who? For whom? A female friend to whom I would suggest that their own was unhelpful? Or would I give one to a straight man as if he'd no chance of access to a real one? I'm sorry his girlfriend left him, never mind and here's this, which boils her down to her essentials? I'd want to imply that he felt these *were* her essentials and no wonder she left? Or would I foist one on a gay man? As what, a novelty letter box? Or I should deliver one to a lesbian as a hint she was sexually hopeless and ought to make do. This is – **For yourself?** – an impossible enquiry. Yes, for myself and I will give it to my partner because I want a rest? Or am I lacking? Or am I supposed to be gay and irreversibly solitary? Or have I discovered that mine doesn't work any more?

I attempted a smile that intended to seem well informed and relaxed. The assistant wore a name badge which called her Mandy, although I couldn't accept that as likely.

I adjusted my smile, broadened its dimensions.

I didn't want Mandy, or whoever she was, to imagine that I had no sense of fun.

Fun is important.

All the Rage

I constructed a small and intentionally visible idea of myself as someone with numerous options and a wide-ranging social circle. I folded my arms and moved on with purpose and as if I had no need of guidance – **Oh, then these** – Mandy wouldn't let me be – **These are wonderful** – I rounded the end of the aisle with her in tow and announcing – **They really are** – as she reached for a favoured item, being factual, not salacious – **Things have moved on** – and she offers me what things have moved on to from among the gathered ranks of more and less sci-fi imitation penises.

It didn't look – *thank you* – very much like a penis at all. Mandy had judged me – *thanks* – over to my left were obsessively anatomical offerings – *thanks* – Mandy had judged I would favour something impressionistic. Vague. Elegant lines. Inhuman.

I had the air, then, of someone who might wish to redesign their partner.

Thank you.

To love and despise simultaneously – Mandy assumed I was capable of that.

Thanks.

Clever Mandy.

Thank you – trying to – *really, thanks* – get rid of her with gratitude and taking the package – mainly a clear plastic bubble for ease of inspection – *thanks now, yes* – and my aim was to shift off to the back of the place, ditch the thing and leave.

Actually, not-so-clever Mandy.

I don't love and despise. That wouldn't be clear in my face, not to someone who knew me, because it isn't factual.

Baby Blue

Mandy is a bad judge of character.

I love and resent.

Everyone does that, it's impossible to avoid. The real experience of love is of having unreasonably lost all shelter. There are wonderful additional elements in love apart from that, factors and truths which demand more than affection, which require worship of sorts, but there is, there really is, that initial loss. Sudden. And you cling to whoever is with you for sheer safety, beyond anything else. You cling to whoever has robbed you and they cling back because they are equally naked – you have stripped them to their blood. They are your responsibility, frail and skinless. It can't be helped.

I hurried from Mandy.

I rushed to the extent that I could rush without suggesting unseemly desire to acquire some further contraption with which to astonish my privacy.

The far wall of the shop offered objects that weren't coat hooks, that wouldn't enable arthritic hands to open tricky jars, that couldn't be used for games of hoopla, even though they were unwieldy, even though they were unlikely, even though the human pelvis could never accommodate them as an internal feature and they were therefore unfit for their stated purpose.

All these wild attempts at satisfaction, these declarations of absurd need.

Chocolate-flavoured condoms. They had chocolate-flavoured condoms.

You like penises, you like chocolate, why not both?

There were many *whys* for *not both*. For many reasons, my opinion was in favour of *not both*.

All the Rage

If I like penises, might I not be assumed to hope the flavour of a penis will be penis, which is to say not too much of a flavour, ideally just this subtle, unflavoured pleasantness and that isn't a problem, how could that be a problem? I don't feel my experience of oral sex is intended to be primarily culinary.

Unless is it? Have I got this wrong? Is it not about love, about knowing and being known? Is it – I can get confused – perfectly reasonable in that, or any other, context to insist, to appear to insist, to act in such a way that I'd be insisting *your penis is inadequate and ought at least to taste of chocolate to compensate, so here you go and roll on one of these?*

Am I being over-sensitive? Am I mistaken in thinking that when I touch the man I love, no matter where I touch the man I love, in no matter what way I touch the man I love, then the point is that I'm touching him and it's love and the whole of him is him and I am happy with the whole of him and my aim is to produce an increase of happiness in both parties and where he is tender I will be tender because that would be only right and the best and finest thing and sweet to my soul and lips in tender places can be tender. Even in the rush and stroke of the moment, it's only simple, only tenderness.

Nothing else would be required.

Something else would be an insult.

I wanted to explain this, because it was important, but nobody I'd want to hear me was there to listen.

I peered from behind the hoopla section until Mandy had pounced on another woman and led her away. They were chatting back and forth as I supposed they were intended

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to, taking advantage of a female-friendly emporium and an informative and unembarrassed ethos and I didn't care about my position per se, but it still made me angry, nevertheless.

Although this was a setting unsuitable for rage.

And anger is always the second emotion, something else having always been there first.

I wish I'd never learned that.

Fear and pain being the most usual precursors.

I would rather not notice the signals that prove I've been hurt or frightened.

Nothing else for you today? – I couldn't quite understand how Mandy had ambushed me again. I'd been heading to the penis area to abandon mine – it was not mine, but was burdensome enough by then to be taken personally – and I'd hoped to be free soon, but there she was – **Ready?** – the pert and relentlessly outgoing and dreadfully helpful Mandy. **I'll take you across to the cash desk.** As if I was an invalid, imbecile, had never visited a shop.

I could see the cash desk. I did not wish to visit the cash desk. I did very much wish to leave.

The easiest option was simply to buy the thing.

Buy it and get out.

We're a Canadian company. I don't know why I had to be told this. **We do things the Canadian Way.** Inexplicable. The young man at the till – I am now of an age, apparently, when the men at tills in sex shops will seem perceptibly young – created some kind of merry personal tension with Mandy. His name badge announced **John**. Mandy and John eyed each other across me as if they were a remarkably blasé couple, looking forward to an evening of not sex.

John – **We like you to be happy** – dextrously unpacked

All the Rage

the penis and – **I'll pop these in** – did indeed pop batteries – several – inside it before scooping one of my hands off the counter and setting the already-thrumming thing across my palm. Mandy smiled and took over – **There we go** – adjusted the settings up up up and down down down. This being of no use to me.

I had not intended to stand in public holding an electric penis while it performed keenly, then gently, then sluggishly, then not.

This way you know it works and is what you want.

John repacked it – **More batteries?** – Mandy was meanwhile incredibly – in the sense of being unbelievably – pleased by this whole turn of events – **We have a deal on batteries.**

I threw everything away once I got outside.

And the entire palaver didn't matter, was unimportant.

I know.

There may be no Canadian Way and perhaps they were only a couple with a kink working through it together in a ludicrously ideal location. Or they were making a joke of me. I don't care about them.

Except that they were more strangers intruding and I am tired of that.

I am so tired. Contributing factor.

I go to bed and hope for fifteen hours uninterrupted and they don't arrive in the same way that there is no snow, or no fun in snow, or no miracle about it.

I get so angry.

Uninterrupted fury is a constant.

It flickers near and far, but stays with me beneath superficial variations.

Which is why this preposterous shop – this preposterous

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story about this preposterous shop, preposterous strangers – it's why I hold them tight.

I hold them until I sweat with holding and I can have faith there is something in my arms, against my arms.

I hold on until I have confidence again in the truth of sweet and voluntary touch.

Even in its absence I can believe. That's what belief is all about – it cannot exist without absence.

Honestly.

I need no substitutes or replacements.

I am lost, but not that lost.

I can subsist on faith.

It seals me away from remembering the afternoon not so far before the shop. Hospital trip – latest hospital trip – mild outside, but the corridors snowy, as if filled with bruised snow – past the doorways and in and undress and smell wrong and like a stranger and wait in the bedroom – wear the gown provided and get into the bed – they wheel me onwards using the bed once I am dressed as someone other than myself – the wide elevator yawning and sluicing me down to the theatre level – chat with the orderly – politeness – I'm paying – shame the public system doesn't work – I pay for that, too – but I pay more for this because then I'm less frightened, then I can think I'm doing something. I am my priority and contain the sum total of my hope. There are smiles as I go, propelled under the lights, and then come the intrusions and I am brave – just looking around to check the theatre, the monitor, the other equipment – I produce jokes, things that have moved on from jokes – and I'd rather not have the sedative and so get discomfort instead, not pain precisely – severe to moderate

All the Rage

discomfort – I am very brave – I say this to myself – there being nobody about who is better informed.

Well done. You are being brave.

But when I said *you*, I meant *me*.

That was understood.

You weren't there.

This story's position is unequivocal on that: your absence.

You weren't there.

You aren't there.

You aren't here.

Not your fault, I know.

It's because I left you.

I have gone to trouble for you, so you don't have to.

Left as if I was going on a jaunt to Over There and gave you no part of the story about the bad bodily changes and the nothing much that anyone can do.

No confessions, no lip gloss and crying.

I'm not in the mood.

No longer being a woman, not a complete woman, not comfortable and me, not as far as I can tell, since they've taken what they had to away. More may be removed on future occasions. Things moving on while I fail to keep pace.

That's why the shop annoyed me.

Mandy.

Mandy and her shop selling everything unnecessary.

She hadn't got a clue.

She'd never lain down with the neat snug of you and held your full attention – cooling skin and being in the afterwards of us – the afterwards being really the destination – the afterwards being the requested now – she'd never eased

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fingers by your cheek, brushed along your jaw inside a new quiet, just touching and peace and us – she'd no idea.

She didn't understand reality.

She hadn't kissed you when you taste of the most excellent stories, perfect in my mouth.

I wish I could tell you about her.

I wish I could give you this story.

I can't, though.

I've gone to trouble without you, because what else could I do? I'm the one who took away your shelter, so I can't bring trouble back to you, I can't drag down the cold to hurt you. It has become necessary to be lost.

If I could see you, I would say this.

I miss you very much.