

LYING CLOSE TO THE SKY

The story of a very private room

David Coates

They had lived in the house for over three years before they came across the room, and then they came across it only by chance.

The house, which had stood empty for two full years before they had occupied it, had initially been more than large enough for their needs, if a little dilapidated when first they had arrived. In the years since, its once impressive ground floor rooms had taken all their renovating zeal, so that the top floor had remained largely unexplored by any of them, adult or child alike. If you had asked them, they would simply have said that the top floor contained only one small room – a book storage area of some sort – largely empty now except for the three wall-to-ceiling bookcases along its far wall. Many a guest had thought that the house must possess an extensive and unused roof space somewhere behind that wall: yet on brief inspection they had invariably found no way of entry into the roof, and so had put the matter aside. But the shape of the family was changing now. The boy was away, just gone to college. The daughter was well into her teens, and the baby was due. In fact the baby was overdue, which is why – with the Labor Day weekend behind them – the adults had decided to open up the roof space, to create a nursery close to the blue Carolina sky.

They came across the room when taking out the old bookcases. They were busy removing the books and bits of wood that they had discovered on the shelves there when the entire middle section of the structure began to move backwards and away from them. When it came to rest again – and it moved maybe four feet at most – the middle bookshelf had slipped back to sit against the far wall of a small recess that had stood all those years, unobserved by any of them, behind the bookcases themselves. When the middle section had finished its slide, it occupied the right half of a recessed closet, leaving just space enough for a grown man to move with ease into the closet's other half. Tentatively the adults made that move – she first, he second. As their eyes adjusted to the darkness of the recess, they saw on the far wall a small light switch, covered in dust. With the closet lit it was clear that the back wall of the recess was itself a sliding door. It was by sliding that door that, heavily pregnant though she was, the woman entered the secret room.

What came into view was no ordinary roof space. What first the woman, and then her husband, entered was a long abandoned though once much-occupied bedroom. With the sliding door re-closed, the entrance through which they had come immediately and miraculously vanished, taking on instead the appearance of a wardrobe whose doors doubled as mirrors. Those mirrors then carried the image of the rest of the roof space – a space that fell away from the wardrobe for some small distance to an outer wall that rose maybe five feet from the floor. The whole space was illuminated from above by a large dormer window and from the sides by lights that the intruders had inadvertently triggered back into life by opening the sliding doors.

The man could walk into the middle of the room before he had to stoop. The woman, being slightly smaller, could make it three-quarters of the way across. That movement took them both towards two paintings on the far wall, both studies in oil of the same male

face. It also took them towards a tiny walk-in bathroom, away to their left, in which abandoned bottles of soap, perfume and shaving gear were scattered randomly on the marble counter of what had once clearly been an elegant hand basin. To their right was a tiny walk-in wardrobe and changing room, paneled in beech and in oak. In it, on a simple brass rod, they could see a string of clothes, almost entirely female: slips, bathrobes and – barely visible in the far corner, discarded on the floor – one abandoned red negligee. And in front of them, below the window, its headboard up against the outside wall, stood a truly enormous bed. It was the bed that struck them most, for at first glance it looked as though it was still warm. Its satin sheets were ruffled. Its covers were scattered. Most intriguingly of all, its pillows were piled one upon the other in a heap that carried still the faint imprint of a woman's body. But whoever that woman had been, she was long gone: for the whole room now lay under the dust of years. Someone had left here in a great hurry, and a very long time ago. The room told the uninitiated that much at least, but it told them absolutely nothing else at all.

Part 1

BEFORE THE ROOM

I

They made a sharply contrasting pair. She was slim and elegant, a thing of remarkable beauty. He was stocky, conservatively dressed, already thickening at the waist. Their children were hers far more than they were his – in appearance at least – and it was as well.

Maria stood by the open window, watching the snow fall. Not a muscle moved, so still was she in the moment – bleak, blocked as usual, the very distance of the house from the road reinforcing, as it always did, her abiding sense of isolation. Chuck, by contrast, was all movement. He paced back and forth, his mind entirely focused on his young and unhappy wife. No snow for him. No sense of impenetrable distance. The only isolation Chuck saw that morning was a domestic one.

‘So I guess we’re finished with your father’s room?’

‘Yes, we’re completely finished with it. Let’s close it, just as it is.’

The question was his, the answer hers: the coldness in the one matched by the irritation in the other. The exchanges between them had not always been like this. They’d been softer with each other once – but not now.

Anyway, this was not the moment for softness. The room in question had never been Maria’s favorite, and it was certainly not on this particular February morning. After all, it had stood empty at the top of the house for years, just one more empty space in a house full of them. The house had always been a Wilson house, passed between the generations – father to son – without thought or question. It had passed that way on at least three previous occasions before it had come to Chuck, and via Chuck, now to her also. But to Maria’s mind, it had never been her house and it never would be, not even when her own father stayed. And he had stayed - longer this time than ever before – through most of 1981 in fact. But now, with the New Year behind them, he’d gone. The room was empty again, back to its normal condition. And this time, he said, he’d gone for good: gone from the Carolinas, gone north, gone back, as he put it, to be among *his* people, away from all these southern reactionaries. The irritation in Maria’s voice that morning was in part the irritation of desertion.

‘Chuck, now that he has gone, I need to talk to you.’

‘About what?’

‘About the usual! Now that we’re alone again, I need it even more.’

‘Maria, I really don’t see the point of discussing that again.’

‘Why ever not?’

‘Because no matter how many times we talk about it, the answer’s still going to be the same! It’s always going to be “no”.’

‘Damn you, Chuck, you’re so old-fashioned. What decade do you think we live in? This is the 1980s, for God’s sake. I can’t believe that we’re even having this conversation, let alone that I’m losing it!’

The set of her husband’s face told Maria that, as on many Mondays past, it was useless to go on. But she went on anyway.

‘If my happiness mattered to you even one bit, if you genuinely loved me, you’d say “yes”... if not for your sake, then at least for mine.’

There was real anger between them now.

‘That’s not fair, Maria. You’re asking way too much. You’re asking me to abandon the deal we made.’

‘Deal?’

‘Yes...the code this family lives by.’

‘Deal! Code!’ Maria wasn’t screaming yet, but she was close. ‘We don’t live by a code!’

‘Yes, of course we *do*. You married into one!’

‘I married you. I didn’t marry a code.’

‘You did. When you married me, you knew exactly what you were getting into...the whole family...an entire package. There’s a code here, a certain way of living...a set of understandings...things in this family...values...that you knew about from the very beginning. You bought into them then, so why not now?’

‘Chuck, you sound more and more like Henry. Don’t talk to me about this family’s values!’

‘Why not? What’s wrong with our values?’

‘You should try living them. Then you’d know what’s wrong with them.’

‘I do live them. I live them all the time...and they actually include honoring and loving my wife. You seem to forget that, and you shouldn’t.’

Chuck struggled for new ground.

‘Yell at me all you like, Maria, but I do care for you, and I do care about your happiness. You know I do...just look around you...at all the things that my care has brought you...’

The sweep of his arm took in the whole of the kitchen, and by implication the whole of the house and yard beyond. What he swept was, by the standards of the times, so much more than most women in their early thirties had any right to expect: a huge house standing in its own grounds, a veritable palace of the latest cars, fancy machinery, and furniture of quality and taste. This was no ordinary house. It had been Henry and Eleanor’s before they’d built its equivalent next door, and now it was theirs – his and Maria’s, a gift from his parents – plush, comfortable, a statement of their class. To Chuck’s mind, it was every woman’s dream: so why was Maria complaining...again.

‘...what more can you ask?’ The frustration in his voice was audible. ‘Do you think that if I didn’t care for you, if I didn’t love you, you’d have all this?’

Maria has seen that arm sweep before. It hadn’t persuaded her then, and it didn’t now.

‘Don’t offer me house arrest as a substitute. You’ve done that before. You know it’s no use to me. I don’t want to be stuck in this house for the rest of eternity, family code or no family code.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I’ve told you over and over again.... I want to teach. The children are old enough now, and I want a career. I have that right. I have the same right to a career as you do, Chuck, no matter what Henry, Ronald Reagan or any other Carolina bigot says to the contrary.’

‘You keep my father out of this. This isn’t about Henry, or the President, or the Carolinas! It’s about us. You already have a career. Jake and Courtney are your career. Being their mother and my wife is your career. You chose it, remember!’

‘I chose it! I chose it!’ Maria was seething now. ‘Be very careful, Chuck...that’s dangerous ground for you. Pregnant girls don’t choose! Not in Henry Wilson’s new south they don’t. I don’t remember there being much choice... I really wouldn’t go there if I were you.’

‘Well don’t worry your little head on my account.’ Chuck’s anger was suddenly rising as fast as Maria’s. ‘I genuinely don’t want to go there. In fact I don’t want to go anywhere...except to work. I’m late. I need to go to work.’ Chuck paused, ‘And what I also need, Maria, is for this Monday fighting between us to stop. I’m sick and tired of starting every week hearing about how unfulfilled you are. Why does it always have to be like this these days...every single Monday?’

‘Perhaps it has something to do with Sundays, and life with Henry and his sermons! Last night, you remember? Two more hours of this place being screwed up...for want of

traditional values ...the usual speech from Henry on the wonders of Ronald Reagan, the evil of tax-and-spend Democrats ...the usual silence from you.'

'I don't need this. I have to go to work.'

'Oh, poor Chuck!' The sarcasm in Maria's voice was honed to razor-sharpness now. 'Poor Chuck *has* to go to work. He doesn't want to, but he has to...while his wife,his beloved wife and the devoted mother of his children...she, who actually *wants* to go to work, she is *not* allowed to.....And what's worse. Stuck as she is, she's then supposed to feel sorry for her poor overburdened husband in his desperate plight.... No, no, no, Chuck. No chance. You can forget that.'

'I'm not looking for sympathy from you, just for some minimum level of understanding, Maria. Understanding that will make this conversation end, and end now.'

'Do you indeed...You want it to end. What a surprise. And on exactly what terms should we end it, then? What should our text be for today? Which of Henry's biblical gems shall we live by this week? How about the usual one? *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.* Shall we use that one? Henry does, all the time!'

'Don't push me Maria. Just leave this thing alone!'

'Or what about his other favorite? *Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.* Is that the better one? Do you want some silence this morning...a bit of subjection?'

'I'm not trying to silence you, or to beat you into subjection.' Chuck was weary now, longing for the Maria of a decade ago. 'I'm simply reminding you that, given the standing of this family in this town, its women don't work.'

'Women do work, you know, even in the Carolinas. In this modern day and age, the vast majority of them do *go out* to work. Or have you forgotten that crucial fact?'

'I haven't forgotten anything. It's you, Maria who forgets things...You forget that, as a Wilson woman, you already have a full agenda... a public role as wife and mother, and a private duty to me in this house. That should be enough for you. It certainly used to be.'

'The joys of being a Wilson woman...how could I have let those slip out of mind?'

'Yes, a Wilson woman. I don't see what's wrong with being a Wilson woman.'

'Oh, don't you? Well perhaps you should ask Caitlin about the joys of being a Wilson woman... that is, if you can catch her sober!'

'Caitlin's drinking has nothing to do with this!'

'Are you sure? Are you really sure? Perhaps I should take to the bottle, like she has.'

‘No, you shouldn’t. Caitlin’s sick. You’re not. God damn it, Maria, because you’re a Wilson, you have a huge space in which to do whatever you want to do. You say you want to be like most modern women? But you’re not like most modern women. You don’t have to worry about money. You’re a Wilson woman. You don’t have to work to survive. Every day you have the freedom from money worries that most women would die for... the space to paint...to study... to do your photography.’

‘Do you know what that sounds like to me?’

‘No, but I guess that you’re going to tell me.’

‘It sounds like art therapy for the inmates!’

‘I don’t cotton to that. I don’t cotton to that at all. Maria, you’re not being fair to me or to Henry. This isn’t a jail and I’m certainly not your jailer.’

‘Really? Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure. That’s ridiculous! I’m not your jailer. I’m your husband. I’m simply the man who cares for you, and who provides for you. And because I do, there are all sorts of things that you can do. But what you can’t do...is work for any school board on which your father-in-law sits as a member. NO WILSON WOMAN WORKS.’ Chuck was screaming now. ‘THEY NEVER HAVE, AND THEY NEVER WILL! IF YOU WANT A LIFE OUTSIDE THIS HOUSE, GO VOLUNTEER AT THE CHURCH, LIKE EVERY OTHER WILSON WOMAN DOES. IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?’

Maria said nothing, silenced by the volume of Chuck’s anger. She understood alright. She understood that right now the last thing she wanted to be was a Wilson woman.

‘So please,’ Chuck’s voice was quieter now, mistaking silence for agreement: ‘Just go find another course to study, another Appalachian hill to paint. Do something that will give you some inner peace, and let me go to work. I have a factory to run and a business to take care of, and there’s a recession on. I don’t need this argument day after day...and in truth, Maria, I don’t deserve it. I really don’t!’

Maria knew that. But these days it was the kind of knowledge that brought her absolutely no comfort at all.

Nine days later, and in a different town, Maria was late to class. The plan had been for she and Caitlin to take a course in creative writing together at the local community college – a mutual exercise, Maria had called it, in the pursuit of Chuck’s much

canvassed “inner peace”. But in the end her sister-in-law had pulled away. Caitlin’s level of inner peace was already too low to sustain the hunt for more.

‘I can’t come,’ she told a frustrated Maria, ‘I just can’t face it today. What’s the point, anyway?’

‘It’ll do you good. Take you out of yourself. Make a change.’

‘Make a change? You think?’

‘I do.’

‘I don’t. What sort of change would it be? Two hours in a classroom, and then we’d still be back here.’ Caitlin’s face clouded with some unspecified pain. ‘.....No, you go. Go on your own. Don’t mind me. I’m just having a bad day, that’s all. You go.... Go! Go. Or you’ll be late.’

So eventually, after more unsuccessful lobbying for companionship, Maria did go; and Caitlin was right. She was late. So late in fact that by the time she slipped into a tiny desk at the very back of the room, the professor was already in full flow, talking of the classes to come, and gathering information on the students as he did so. Maria settled, hoping that her late arrival had gone unobserved; but women of her beauty rarely enter busy rooms unnoticed, and certainly she didn’t. Nathan saw her, smiled a greeting without pausing in his presentation, and moved slowly down the room towards her. Close by her now, the eyes of her fellow students turned in her direction by his movement, he placed before her the sheet of paper on which they and he had already written their contact information.

But Maria was not yet ready to give him the basic details of her real identity. She hadn’t come to this class to be a Wilson woman: on the contrary, she’d come precisely to escape from that condition. So on an impulse and in the full view of others, she suddenly invented new details for herself: putting down in turn the first things that came to mind – her own first name, the name of her shoulder bag, and Caitlin’s address and phone number. No private words had yet passed between them – indeed they’d yet to speak to each other at all – but Maria had already given herself a new persona. Then safely relabeled as Maria Gucci, she settled back, immediately finding unexpected comfort in the sound of his words and the physicality of his presence.

For from almost that first moment, Maria knew that she wanted to sketch Nathan’s face. It had, to her eyes, such a beautiful symmetry to it, such a wonderful balance and proportionality to the interplay of its parts. Later she would decide that its particular magic lay in the way his mouth was cushioned into softness by the set of his cheekbones; but on first seeing him it was the way his entire face was framed by the fall of his hair that struck her. It was Nathan’s hair, worn long, down to his shoulders in the manner of those times, which immediately made him for her an object of beauty and, potentially, a subject of desire.

Indeed, the more that Maria watched Nathan that first Wednesday, from her private space at the back of his class, the more that desire grew: and the more she began to weigh him – in ways entirely unexpected even to her – less as a teacher than as a possible lover. She had not come to his class with that in mind. She had come angry with Chuck and frustrated with Caitlin. She had come to get away from old relationships, not to build new ones; but there was something about this man that pulled her, and released in her with remarkable speed and ease thoughts she'd never previously entertained. She had never had a lover before, but in the middle of Nathan's second session, it suddenly came to her that maybe it was time for her to take one; and if it was time, that he might very well be the lover to take. Even Maria would concede later – certainly to herself and occasionally even to others – that for a decision of such novelty and magnitude, it was one taken with unseemly speed and lack of self-reflection. But it was taken. Within just two hours of being in Nathan's presence Maria had decided to seduce him. It was a seduction that Nathan never saw coming.

Once set to her chosen task, Maria began quite methodically to create a private relationship with her new professor in their shared public space. She did so by consciously holding herself back, and then coming forward, moving to her rhythms rather than to his. She settled into a pattern of silence, offering very little of herself to the class as a whole, preferring rather to listen and watch – to watch him only, to watch him with total intensity – and to do so from the very edge of the class, always at the back. In the second session of the six he would teach that semester, Nathan set about explaining some of the basic skills involved in the creation of a novel. He used the novel he was writing – a novel about an itinerant jazz player – as his example throughout. And he sent his students on their way with a task. The task was to write the opening paragraph of a piece of fiction that they could then share. Jazz was his passion, he told them, the space where his private personality found its public expression. Writing could become their passion, their route to a public presentation of their private selves. So write something, he told them, something simple, something that, while not autobiographical, should be built stage by stage out of places that they knew, people they had met, hopes they had shared.

Maria was in class again, in her usual place, the following Wednesday when Nathan had them read aloud what they had written. Each of them had a piece, except her.

'No', she said when it came to her turn, 'I haven't managed to write anything yet. Later perhaps. I'm sorry. It's been a very bad week.'

She smiled apologetically, turned back into herself, saying nothing more and freeing him to move on to another student. He made that move, but not before she let him (and him alone) see just the edge of her troubled self. Her eyes met his in the first of their private moments. She was looking down at the desk, but as he stood before her she raised her eyes towards him – not moving her head, just searching for his gaze through her still lowered lashes, her face suddenly knotted with an unspecified pain – so that in the

moment he thought that she would actually cry. But she did not. Instead she lowered her eyes, very slowly spread both hands out on to the desktop, gripped the desk tightly, and shuddered ever so slightly.

That shudder required of him a response: which is why for the very first time Nathan actually touched her. In a gesture motivated by comfort and concern, he put his left hand lightly on top of her right one. He left it there for a second, and then he moved on. It was enough. It was enough for Maria to pull him to her, and it was enough for Nathan to feel that there was already something private between them, something that would bring her to him again when the class was not in session. And it did. She came to him at the end of the hour, walking slowly between the desks as the others were leaving, ostensibly to apologize once more – but in truth to give him the pages she had in fact written, pages she was willing to share with him, but with him alone.

‘They are very private,’ she told him quietly, ‘but I would really like your comments.’

‘Whatever you wish’, he said, his voice as low, as soft as hers. ‘I’ll keep them with me. Then next week we can talk after class, when everyone has gone’.

The story that Maria left was short, unfinished, like the pieces the others had read: but unlike those it went way past the brief that he had set for them. It began to tell the saga of a young woman of strong Catholic principles, trapped into marriage by an unwanted pregnancy, and then desolate and lost. The piece left him with a certain image of the woman, a strong image of her child, but no image at all of the husband. There was not a word of description of the man in the entire piece. The child was described, and was clearly loved. The man was not. Instead the piece ended, abruptly and for no immediately obvious reason, with a description of a storm – of winds and rain and darkness – with the woman and the child struggling to reach some unspecified place, and clearly failing. It was a very bleak piece that she left for him to read, more a set of fragments than a coherent whole, but fragments that were strikingly written; and of course fragments that left him wondering to just what degree their bleakness, even the story itself, was in fact her own.

Nathan kept the essay by him – day and night – for the entirety of that week, and found himself returning to it over and over again. His mind was full of her; and he was not certain why. Uncharacteristically, he found himself impatient for the arrival of the next Wednesday – regularly ticking off the days, and endlessly rehearsing the questions that somehow he would put to her, the questions that would carry him from the discussion of her writing towards the details of the real story that he already wanted to know. So it came as a sharp disappointment to him, and something of a surprise, to discover at the end of the fourth session that there would be no private conversation between them that day, that Maria could not stay after class. It came as no surprise to her, however, for it had never been any part of her intention to discuss with him the pages she had written. That was not why she had prepared them, nor why she had given them to him to read and

reflect upon. Instead, and speaking in the low tones of their own already established manner of exchange, she very quietly apologized to him for her impending and abrupt departure.

‘I can’t stay. Unfortunately. I have to go. I have to pick up the children, to take them to the dentist’, she said. ‘But here,’ she paused, reaching into her large Gucci bag, ‘I have something for you’, and she lowered on to the desk a thin flat package.

‘I hope you like it. I found it especially for you – a gift, a small token of thanks.’

Then she was gone.

Nathan was left, strangely desolate, holding her unopened gift before him. The room was totally empty now – just him and the package – plus this unexpected lowness of spirits. He moved his head from side to side, exercising his neck, pulling himself up and away from the memory of the missed conversation, and opened the package. Its contents restored his spirits in an instant, and set his mind racing back towards her again. Maria had bought him a copy of the very jazz record which the local newspaper had reviewed glowingly only that Sunday, the record that he had planned to buy when next he made his weekly trip to the local bookshop. And she had not only bought it. She had wrapped it in paper patterned with the images of jazz – with trumpets, clarinets and saxophones - and had written between the two instruments in the top left-hand corner of the wrapping, just the shortest of notes.

‘May the playing of this remind you of me, and bring you pleasure in the memory.’

Nathan communed with the music all night, and again in the morning. And then, as though the music might perhaps not have been enough to appease his disappointment, Maria called him – to see if indeed he had liked his gift. As their conversation began, he couldn’t imagine how she’d found his number. Then he remembered the contact list from class, and knew he had hers too – and he thanked her, told her it was quite wonderful, and gently chided her for an unnecessary expense. Just as gently, she demurred.

‘It gave me great pleasure to find it for you,’ she said. ‘Something to match the pleasure you give me each Wednesday. All I ask is that you play it over and over again, and that you think of me each time you do.’

In all its important ways this was a planned campaign, but like all successful campaigns it required its moments of good fortune. Fortune shone on Maria on the Friday of that fourth week, when by accident rather than by design she and Nathan met again. It had already become Nathan’s practice, most Fridays, towards the end of the afternoon, to drift down to the local bookshop in what was, for him, still a very new town. He knew very

few people yet, so he went less to meet friends than to check the latest magazines, to look at the latest records and to browse in the music section. The browsing gave him comfort. It was his way of marking the onset of the weekend. It was also the way in which he met Maria for the first time outside the classroom; for as he browsed through the new jazz records that Friday, so too did she.

He saw her first. Her back was to him, so he took a moment to recognize her. He was not expecting to see Maria there, of course. As far as he knew, she had no interest in jazz. But there was no mistaking her shock of long curled jet-black hair, nor the faint echo of henna amid its blackness. He saw her, and she sensed him. She turned, at first surprised, even embarrassed, then just as quickly composed.

‘How great to see you....What brings you here?’

‘Oh, I....I normally come down on Friday, about this time, to do what you’re doing – to browse, sometimes to buy – normally just to look. And you?’

‘I was just passing. I have this new professor’, she laughed. ‘He’s very keen on jazz. I thought I’d better find out what it’s all about.’

‘You must always take your professor’s passions very seriously.’

Nathan had meant musical passions, so he regretted the word as soon as it was uttered. He flushed slightly. Maria saw the flush.

‘Ah, but how best to do that? It’s not easy, you know’, she teased him, ‘finding everything you need to know about jazz, between one Wednesday and the next.’

‘Well’, he said, feigning a look of detached scholarship, ‘Well, reading about it is one way. Listening is another. But the best way’, and he dropped his voice just an inch, and lowered his head towards her just a fraction, ‘the best way is to find some really friendly jazz player, and have him guide you through it, note by note. You don’t happen to know such a jazz player, do you?’

‘Let me think.’ She paused. ‘Yes, yes, you know – I do think I might!’

Their voices were light now, their eyes sparkling at each other, each laughing on the surface, excited underneath.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘well if that’s the case, I can put this back, and get some coffee instead.’

Maria then returned the record she was holding to the stack from which she’d taken it only minutes before, in the process turning her body entirely away from him. That done, she turned back, her movement much quicker now, her hair swinging with the motion of her body, crossing and then clearing her face.

‘No time like the present, I say.’ Her hand was on his arm. ‘Let’s have some coffee’.

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This particular bookshop was a composite affair: books and papers to the left, sheet music and records to the right, and in the center, elevated, a small coffee area into which it was possible to retreat with whatever part of the book stock you were poised to read before purchase. The coffee shop itself was on two floors, its overflow area beneath the main one, accessible down a narrow, winding stairwell. It was down that stairwell that she took him, into the very corner of the overflow, far from public view. Each had their coffee, and each their questions. Both pretended that the conversation was casual. Both knew that it was not.

Maria moved first, better prepared for the foray.

‘Are you here alone?’ she asked.

‘Yes’ he said, ‘I always am – just me and my music’.

Nathan made it easy for her, wanting to give her whatever information she desired of him. So, riding with the gentle rhythm of her questions, he told her a little about his New Orleans background, his Berkeley student days, his brief time in drama school, the rise and fall of his jazz career, even his current attempt to resurrect it by a strange mixture of supplementary teaching, copy-editing and the buying and selling of houses. The last of these particularly intrigued her, and allowed her to explore, apparently without any special interest, the nature and place of his current living. A musician needs space to practice, well away from neighbors, he told her; and most of them – the musicians, that is, not the neighbors – need a second, even a third, source of income as well. They do all kinds of things, ‘including,’ he laughed, ‘teaching the odd course in creative writing’. His had been a double major in English and Music. Copy-editing paid part of the rent. Sadly, his playing was rarely enough to cover the rest. At his level of jazz, you always needed something else as well. So his particular solution – at least the one he’d used during his stay in Chicago and the one he planned to use here – was to buy some old and isolated house, fix it up, and sell it on.

‘Can you do that?’ Maria asked, ‘renovate old properties?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I can – at least I think I can with a little help. I’ve only done it once. This will be my second house. I just had some family money left over in Chicago, and I used that to buy the first place. I can do the building and the woodwork, especially the woodwork, but not the plumbing or the lights. But you know, there are always other people around – other musicians – who can be persuaded to help, in return for a little cash and a little assistance in the band.’

He made it sound suitably alternative, fly by night, even a little risqué.

‘Are you building now?’

‘No...no, not just now. I’m still new in town, finding my way around. I’m renting a small apartment, buried in the woods. A secret hideaway!’

Nathan laughed apologetically, the cut and style of her clothes suddenly reminding him that her house was likely to be nothing like his.

‘But there is a house I’ve seen. Nothing special, but it has potential. I’ve made an offer on it, and I’ll know soon enough. But now, no, no, no, I’m just a poor tenant. How about you?’

He suddenly thought he had told her enough.

‘Oh, if you’re a poor tenant, then I’m just a poor housewife. I don’t do much. A few courses, a little drawing, and the children of course.’ Maria paused. ‘Is your apartment here in town?’

Nathan smiled at the speed and ease with which his questions were deflected and the interrogation switched back towards him. She was very beautiful, he thought, sitting there, quizzing him. Her questions warmed him. Her beauty transfixed him. She had a way of sweeping a loose strand of her black hair off her face simply by pushing it up her forehead, moving the hair by opening her fingers and sweeping them gently across the front of her eyes, catching the hair as she did so. For a second he was so absorbed by the movement of her hand, and the fall of her hair, that he didn’t reply. He had an overwhelming urge to lean across the table, stem the movement, and do the job for her. But he was not so bold. She saw the thought and noticed the restraint. She smiled, and the smile brought him back to her.

‘No, I live out of town – towards the mountains. This is my town for playing, for browsing in bookshops, for meeting beautiful women...’

Maria nodded graciously in recognition of the compliment.

‘...but not for living. There are too many people here for me. I had my fill of people in Chicago, Right now, I’m kind of in retreat!’

Their coffee was by this time untouched and stone cold. Nathan saw that, and offered her another.

‘No, unfortunately I have to go. I’m already late.’

She paused, leaning forward slightly, her head moving close to his across the table.

‘It was great to see you’.

Then, as she stood up to gather her coat, Maria did one last thing. She put her left hand down onto his right, gripping it firmly and holding it still while, leaning quickly over him, she kissed the side of his cheek. The kiss was short, but it was genuine. It was intimate. It was meant. It was not the fleeting touch of a social kiss. It was something else, something quite other, and they both knew it.

‘Have a great weekend,’ she said softly, ‘I’ll see you on Wednesday. Take care of yourself between now and then’.

The unexpected intimacy silenced him. He simply sat there, watching as she pulled on her coat and headed to the stairs.

‘Just one other thing,’ Maria said, turning back to him as she swept her hair off her face for a final time, ‘between now and then, no talking to any other beautiful women. You promise?’

‘I promise,’ he said, “I promise!”

--

In class the following Wednesday, Maria was unusually animated, effectively leading the charge when the students persuaded Nathan to make the highlight of their next and final class the reading by him of extracts from his as yet unfinished novel. And on the following Friday she was in the coffee shop again – only this time she was not browsing in the jazz section. She was sitting in the front of the shop, in the seat nearest to the entrance, waiting for him, and making no pretense of being in the store for any other reason. She saw him. She waved. He went over, unsure whether he was allowed to return her kiss of the week before. He thought better of it, smiled his greeting and sat down.

‘No’, she said, ‘not here. Let’s not stay here. There are too many people. Let’s buy two coffees and go downstairs’.

She went before him, moving at speed, to claim the table they had occupied before. He bought the coffees, followed her down, and settled in to a second round of gentle interrogation. And as before, he made no serious inroad into the shroud of mystery that she built around herself. It was as though she wanted to draw a line in time, step across it, and think only of the present and the future. She had children. That he knew. Her children were vital to her. That she never hid. But most everything else about her remained obscure and unexplained; and they talked mainly of his jazz, his house bid, and his past. His brief time at drama school, and his copy-editing, figured this time in her gentle quizzing of him – that much at least was new – but otherwise their second conversation was less important for what was said than for the way it ended.

Maria was clearly very good at endings. Her last one had been good, and this one was brilliant. As she was talking of having to go, she contrived to drop her coffee spoon on the floor, and both of them went to pick it up. As she stretched under the table, bending to

the floor in search of the spoon, Nathan too stretched down, so that their heads met in a moment of subterranean intimacy. He had come off his chair, was crouched beneath the table, as she, pushing her chair back, leaned forward towards him. The movement of her body, and the contortion of the position into which the search was setting her, opened the front of the jacket she was wearing; so that her breasts fell away from her body, resting within the open jacket only against the white linen chemise that was substituting for her bra. She stayed in that position for far longer than the search for the spoon warranted, allowing him the view; and then, her lips as dry as his, she kissed him. It was not a long kiss – the position of his body, let alone that of hers, precluded longevity - but it was the kiss of a lover; and it was beautiful to Nathan for that.

‘I will talk to you on Wednesday’, Maria said. ‘I absolutely promise. Whatever else happens, that class must not be our last.’

--

They both arrived early at class that last Wednesday: Nathan as normal, Maria uncharacteristically so. By the time she walked through the door he was already at his desk, sorting papers, talking quietly to another of the women in the class. She went as usual to her seat at the back, watching and biding her time. She saw him finish his conversation, and the woman move away. She saw him turn his attention back to the papers still unsorted on the surface before him, so that, head lowered, he then did not see her move across the room to him. But he sensed her coming, hoping, even knowing that she would. Maria stood briefly before him, talking quietly of class matters of no consequence, this time her body blocking his view of the rest of the class. As she spoke, she quietly laid a small envelope on the pile before him; then suddenly silent and pensive, withdrew, and resumed her seat. Nathan finished the arranging of his teaching material, opening the envelope as he did so.

‘Dear Nathan, I need to see you,’ he read, *‘please say that I can. A meeting, somewhere private, soon, where we can talk. There is so much to say and do.’*

It was only with the greatest of difficulty that he then managed, having read it, calmly to rise and speak, let alone to read (as he did) the small opening chapter of his as yet unfinished fiction to a gathering of strangers and to the woman of his choice. Predictably the strangers judged it fine, applauded him for it, and urged him to read more. But by then he had given them all he had to give. What remained in him he now urgently wanted to direct to her, and to her alone. So he set them to a final task, and using the cover which their work provided, scribbled on her note the briefest of replies.

‘Yes, I want to too. I will come. Just say where and when.’

That done, he slipped the note between the pile of questionnaires waiting on his desk. He distributed a questionnaire to each of the students, and returned the note to her. Five minutes later, her completed questionnaire gave him his directions.

'If you can,' it read, '10 o'clock, Tuesday morning, the parking deck at the hospital, the Orange level.'

II

The next few days were ones of quiet reflection for them both – a last lull before the storm, a final opportunity to draw back that neither of them chose to take. Nathan didn't draw back because he was as yet not entirely certain of what he would be drawing back from; and Maria did not draw back because she saw no need to. She was, after all, the designer of the dance here; and because she was, the unfolding of events to that design generated within her a growing sense of empowerment rather than of anxiety.

In any case, her weekend was, as usual, full to overflowing with roles that gave her very little time and comfort, and roles that gave her even less adult affection and support. On that Saturday and Sunday, as on many others, she was in turn golf widow, corporate wife, reluctant Baptist, dutiful daughter-in-law, and taxi-driver for her children. These were all roles that she had played many times before, and roles that she could perform without thought or identification; although they were also roles that lately she had handled only by simultaneously retreating into a total and impenetrable silence. Either way, Maria's many domestic responsibilities that weekend left her with precious little time for either personal reflection or private fantasy. The only space that might have served her otherwise came on the Friday evening, when she joined Caitlin for their monthly 'girl's night out'. If there was to have been a moment that weekend at which Maria might have chosen to unburden herself – had unburdening been on her agenda – it would have been this one. It was a moment, however, that she chose not to use for that purpose, try though Caitlin did to have it otherwise.

'So tell me,' Caitlin opened up as they settled in the bar, waiting for their table, 'I haven't seen you on your own for weeks. What have you been doing?'

'Not much...not much that's new, anyway. Except the writing course. You remember, the writing course?'

'Oh yes, the writing course. How could I forget that!' There was a pause, then: 'so tell me...what was he like?'

'What was who like?'

'...your creative writing professor?'

'Oh, you mean Nathan?'

'First name terms, is it? So close already!'

Maria laughed.

'It was a very informal class. First names all round. He was Nathan. I was simply Maria.'

‘Not Maria Wilson?’

‘*No*, Caitlin, definitely not Maria Wilson. Just Maria. For once, a place where being a Wilson was not important.’

‘I’ll drink to that!’

There was a momentary unease between them. Both of them knew that Caitlin did far too much drinking to that already.

‘So what *was* he like?’

‘He was everything you could want in a professor.’

‘Everything!’

‘Yes, everything.’

There was a definite lightness in Maria’s voice, a sudden rush of enthusiasm and passion. She so wanted to tell Caitlin, but she knew that she couldn’t.

‘He had a way of talking to you with his hands.’

‘His hands?’

‘Yes, his hands. He would ask you something. When you replied, he would take what you’d said and mould it with his hands! Such beautiful hands!’

‘That’s all. Great hands?’

‘No, that’s not all...but what else can I tell you? I liked him. I liked him a lot...for all sorts of reasons.’ Maria paused. ‘Look, he just wasn’t like Chuck or Henry or Michael, or indeed any of the Wilson men.’

‘I’m liking him more and more myself.’ Caitlin warmed to her familiar theme.

‘Yes, Caitlin, you’d certainly have liked him. You should have come. He was a good listener. He always let you finish what you were trying to say, even when what you were saying wasn’t really worth finishing...and of course he wasn’t....’ Maria struggled for the word.

‘He wasn’t what?’

‘He wasn’t closed off to everything that’s new. There were no clichés, no snap quotes from the Bible...no putting women in their place...no pontificating.’

‘He was obviously not from here.’ Caitlin had a definite view of Carolina men. It wasn’t a flattering one.

‘No, he wasn’t. He was born in New Orleans, and went to school in California and Chicago.’

‘He told you that!’

‘Yes.’

‘You alone?’

Maria saw the danger and backed away.

‘He was very open with everyone...he talked a lot about himself as a way of freeing us up to do the same.’

‘Did you?’

‘Did I what?’

‘Do the same? Talk about yourself?’

‘No...no, actually I didn’t.’

‘So,’ Caitlin as teasing now, ‘he wasn’t so good at drawing out his students, after all?’

‘Yes, he was...very good,’ Maria was instantly defensive, ‘just not from me. You know...you know yourself...this Wilson thing doesn’t travel well. I didn’t go there to talk about Chuck, or Henry. I went there to get away from them.’

‘Very wise!’ Caitlin said. ‘So are you going to see him again?’

‘The class is over.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘I know.’

‘Well, are you going to see him again?’

Her sister-in-law’s face was now inches from Maria’s own.

‘I might.’ Maria smiled. ‘I have thought about it. I might. I haven’t decided...I always could...I have his address and number...I might.’

‘An affair!’

‘No!’ Maria was retreating fast now. ‘Just a friendship....a private friendship...a very private friendship.’

‘Private?’

‘Yes...possibly...I don’t know...just something for me...something quiet...something different.’

‘Are you going to?’

‘I don’t know. Probably not....if I did, it would be very innocent...nothing that hurt anyone else....I just like him, that’s all...and I don’t want to lose contact with him so soon after meeting him.’

‘No wickedness on the side?’

‘No, no wickedness on the side...and anyway, Caitlin,’ Maria was laughing now, ‘this is all your fault. If you’d taken the class with me, as you were supposed to do, none of this conversation would be happening.’

Caitlin smiled knowingly at the younger woman, seeing the attempted deflection. The attempt failed.

‘Oh, I see...a toy boy. Is that what you’re planning for Christmas!’

‘No. no. nothing like that!’ Maria laughed. ‘What a terrible thought. Anyway Caitlin, Wilson women don’t do toy boys.’

‘Don’t be so sure!’ The older woman’s face suddenly clouded.

‘You?’ Maria was suddenly focused on things other than Nathan.

‘Yes, if you must know...me...’ Caitlin drained her glass. ‘But it’s very old history... history best forgotten.....totally forgotten, in fact...Just be careful, Maria...be very...very careful.’

‘Careful about what?’

Caitlin smiled, the lightness forced: ‘if you don’t know, Maria, then I don’t need to tell you!’

‘I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Good! Then let’s keep it that way.’

In the event, there was plenty of free if cryptic advice around that weekend. Nathan got some too – with much the same effect.

After all, it was he rather than Maria who had the genuinely spare moments that weekend. It was he who had the time, amid a string of jazz sessions and, by chance, the fortieth birthday party of Ann, his friend's wife, to contemplate his fate and to escape from it. It was not an escape he chose to take, even though in his case he had the easiest of ways to do so – the offer of another date. It was a date he turned down. He'd had such a date before: one arranged for him by Ann, who was already regularly plying him with the names and descriptions of "suitable women" that she knew. But this time he declined the offer, opaquely explaining why.

'I have a sort of date already.'

'A sort of date?'

'Yes, not really a date, more a new friend.'

Ann was already quite drunk, but even sober she would hardly have followed that.

'A new friend? A new friend....this new friend is a woman?'

Ann momentarily entertained an enormous doubt on this key matter.

'Yes, she is a woman!' Nathan laughed. 'Don't worry, your Josh is quite safe when I'm around!'

'Thank goodness. What a dreadful thought... you and Josh....so it's a woman.' There was a pause, then the penny dropped. 'Oh, I get it. She's married. Your date's a married woman!'

'She's not my date, but yes, she is married. We're just meeting on Tuesday. She wants to talk to me.'

'I bet she does!'

'No, not like that. At least, I don't think so. She's way out of my league.'

'What do you mean...your league?'

'Oh she's a real beauty...amazing body...great clothes...lots of money. Way out of my reach.'

‘Then why does she want to talk to you?’

‘I don’t know. She likes me, I guess. She was one of the students in my class. We met a couple of times outside the class too, by chance.’

‘By chance?’

‘Yes, by chance. She just happened to be in the bookstore when I was.’

‘Amazing stuff, chance!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh Nathan, wake up. Married women don’t just accidentally bump into handsome single men that they want to talk to. The woman’s stalking you!’

‘No, she isn’t. It’s not like that at all.’

‘Are you sure?’

Yes, she just likes me...and I like her. The class was over, and we wouldn’t meet again. She didn’t want that. She wants to talk.’

‘So you think it’s your conversation that she wants?’

The look on Ann’s face momentarily reminded Nathan of another woman’s face: that of his mother. He knew how to handle mothers. Stall them!

‘I don’t know what she wants. I’ll find out on Tuesday, then I’ll let you know.’

Nathan was tiring of this interrogation. Ann, by contrast, was not.

‘I bet you she wants you for your body, not your mind.’

What’s wrong with my mind?’

‘Nothing...and there’s nothing wrong with your body either....Anyway, what about you? Why are you seeing this great beauty? Are you stalking her?’

‘No, I’m not stalking her. You know me, Ann. I’m comfortable in my own skin. I like my own space. I don’t go hunting women...but I like them, of course. When a woman like this one turns up, and says she wants to talk, I’m not going to walk away.’

‘But what are you walking into, I wonder?’

‘Nothing heavy, I promise. I don’t do heavy any more. I’ve been there. I’ve been burnt. Nobody gets that close to me anymore. You know that. I told you that before...’

‘You did. In fact, the last time we had this conversation you went on and on about your defenses against commitment...the way you liked living on the edge of people’s lives but at the center of no one’s but your own. Do you think this woman knows about your defenses?’

‘I doubt it. Not yet, but she will.’

‘She will, will she? Well, just be careful, that’s all. These “talks” are easier to start than to finish, and I’d hate to see you hurt.’

‘Hurt by what?’

Ann smiled. ‘If you don’t know, then I don’t need to tell you!’

‘I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Good! Then let’s keep it that way.’

Tuesday, so ardently awaited, dawned overcast and windy. Clouds raced across its sky, sun and warmth locked in prolonged and losing battle with dullness and gloom. It was not the weather for outdoor romance – that Nathan knew – but it was exactly the right weather for his mood. That morning, sun and cloud competed inside his head as well as above it, as he struggled to plan for the eventualities of a day whose importance he sensed but whose design he could not discern. Though his indecision surprised and irritated him in turn, it shouldn’t have done so; for eventualities are the products of purposes – and he of course, still had no clear sense of her purposes in all of this. He imagined one purpose, and happily spread clean sheets upon his bed. He imagined another, and more resignedly spread picnic food and coffee flasks on his table. One moment he was filling the fridge with salmon and champagne, and choosing the music of seduction. The next he was filling the car with coats and boots, and choosing nothing more significant than pathways for quiet reflection. Awake early, he watched himself repeatedly ebb and flow to the rhythm of the weather, and was glad that she at least could not see him so immobilized by his battle between uncertainty and hope. We will walk or we will sleep, he thought, and – preferences apart – he was game for both. But which it was to be, he quite simply couldn’t know; and because he couldn’t, his preparations for their meeting that morning covered all the possible eventualities. It was for him an early morning of picnics *and* sheets – and above all, it was an early morning of waiting.

It was the waiting that eventually got to him. It laid its weight on both his energy and his spirits; even though he was not the first lover, and he would certainly not be the last, to find that longing dissolves and stretches time. ‘A watched kettle never boils’, his mother

used to tell him – and resist it though he did, he knew that she was always right. The arrival of Maria in his life had slowed the progress of the moments as nothing in his experience before had ever done. Indeed, for him, waiting for her that particular morning, time came to a virtual stop. Hours which on easier days had slipped inexorably by, now miraculously deconstructed themselves into a seamless stream of discrete seconds, each of which demanded of him that he count and experience it alone. By 9:15 he could stand it no longer. No matter that the hospital was, at most, only twenty minutes away by car. Leaving and driving was by then a far better way of waiting than staying and pacing: so he went. ‘The Orange Level’, she’d said. He’d no idea where that was, but he had plenty of time to seek it out. Yet that morning, even the parking deck refused to consume the moments for him. Its floors sat one upon the other, straightforwardly color-coded to the rainbow. So the red floor was last, the orange just beneath it. He went, drove up each color in turn, found the Orange Level, and again waited.

Waiting, he had time to survey the structure of the building. As he quickly realized, it was an unusual and convoluted thing. Movement between its floors was neither easy nor fast, for each level of the parking deck was linked by a footbridge directly to the hospital proper, so that to move between levels you had to enter and leave the hospital itself. She must have done that, since no other car swept through the Orange Level in the minutes before she appeared; and indeed when she did, he even had a moment of doubt that the woman walking so purposefully towards him, as he stood waiting beside his car, was actually Maria at all. Her body was hidden – shoulder to floor – by a loose flowing grey coat that he’d never seen before. Her hair was completely obscured by a headscarf, and the top half of her face was secreted away behind dark glasses that neither the weather nor the lighting on the Orange level justified even for a moment. The only part of Maria that Nathan recognized with ease as she walked towards him that morning was her large Gucci shoulder bag, which is why he began by teasing her gently that he only knew her by her bag.

‘I’m used to beautiful strangers plunging into my car’ he told her. ‘It happens all the time. But even so you had me worried. I thought I was about to be propositioned by a passing Bedouin.’

‘Just drive,’ she laughed. ‘We’ll do the Bedouin bit later.’

‘Where to?’

‘Up to the red level,’ she said, ‘then straight out, down the ramp, to the interstate. There’s a secret house that I’m very anxious to see.’

Much of the ensuing journey was then given over to the shedding of this disguise, an endeavor that proved more difficult to effect than even Maria had anticipated. The long grey coat was by far the hardest of her protective covers to shed, and the one she tried first. Once in Nathan’s Chevy Impala, she could with some difficulty slip it off her

shoulders, and she did. But the coat was also wrapped around her feet, trapped behind her back, and stuck beneath her. Even in the relatively generous space allowed to her by the Impala's bench seats, she still needed at least two hands to deal with the coat on all these fronts, and at least two more to lift herself from the seat so that she could begin the battle; which is why – endless limbs short – she quickly became totally stuck, the coat neither on nor off. And the laughing didn't help. Neither his, nor indeed hers – fueled as that was by his merriment, her embarrassment, and their underlying excitement at being alone together at last.

'I'd just like to say,' his voice teasing her again, 'that watching a beautiful woman rip her clothes off is supposed to be an erotic experience. I read that in my Boy Scout handbook. But there's nothing erotic about that grey coat. So if you're planning to come again dressed for the desert, we must definitely find you a sexier disguise.' He was still thinking Arab. 'Something less Bedouin, more.....' He struggled momentarily for the alliteration. Then it came to him. '...more Barbarella.'

The thought of Jane Fonda tumbling out of her clothes in space suddenly seemed entirely apposite. Maria liked the idea too. It made her laugh.

'Just concentrate on your driving,' she told him, in mock seriousness, 'and leave Jane Fonda out of this. I'm having enough trouble with this coat as it is, without you bringing on the serious competition.'

They were well on the interstate by now, far from her town, nearly at his. With the distance came safety for her, and with safety a new relaxation and lightness of spirit. Free of the need for them now, she took off the headscarf and slipped the glasses directly into the shoulder bag whose large presence to her right had made its own contribution to the struggle with the coat. Then totally disrobed of disguise, she flopped back into the seat, feigning exhaustion.

'If I'd known that having an affair was so tiring,' she laughed, 'I'd have gone to bed earlier last night.'

His reply was immediate, and entirely to the point.

'Is that what we're having...an affair?'

Realizing the enormity of her indiscretion, it was Maria's turn momentarily to flush. 'I sincerely hope so. What did you think we were having?'

Nathan was total excitement now, holding to the lightness of the conversation only by a huge act of will. 'That's fine by me. Count me in. It's just that nobody told me, so I wasn't sure.'

'Well', she said, very gently, taking his right hand off the wheel and placing it briefly in her own, 'Well', she said, 'I hope you're sure now'.

And for a while, since he was now sure, they both retreated into their thoughts, and into an easy silence.

When he spoke again, there was a new gentleness in his voice. ‘Why the disguise?’ he began, teasing her once more, ‘We’re not in danger, are we? You’re not married to the Mob, are you?’

The very idea made her laugh out loud. ‘No, I’m not married to the Mob. You just watch too many movies – and quite the wrong kinds, clearly! I just don’t want anyone out there to be hurt. This is a small town. There are lots of prying eyes. I don’t want any of them...;’ and now she was not teasing. She was suddenly deadly earnest: ‘...any of them’, she repeated, ‘seeing us together. Not in this town. Ever!’

‘Well’, he said to her, ‘you’re out of town now. Way out. So we should be fine.’

And indeed they were: both fine and well out of town. He fine, bubbling inside at the thought of her and of things to come. She, equally content, settling down into her seat as though it was actually her sofa. For by now she was not so much sitting on the car seat as curling up inside it, her body turned to him, her left side resting against the back of the bench seat. He, driving, could not turn to see all this. She alone had the direct view. But he had a strong sense of her proximity now. That sense was so strong indeed that – as the easy silence settled between them again – he once more took his right hand off the wheel and rested it on the nearest of her knees, his fingers slipping beneath the edge of her skirt, reveling in the feel of her nyloned skin. She, responding to his touch, squeezed her knees together, trapping his hand between them and keeping it there. Then, turning to survey the inside of the car for the first time that morning, she saw a picnic hamper and coffee flask lying half-hidden on the back seat beneath the folds of the coat that she had eventually discarded there.

‘You prepared a picnic’. Her voice ran light. ‘How great! Are we going out?’

‘I don’t know. You tell me. I just wasn’t sure what you wanted to do. So I packed a picnic just in case.’

‘Just in case what?’ she teased.

‘Just in case I couldn’t lure you back to my place, to do wild and wicked things with me.’

‘Ah, well,’ her voice mocked him gently, ‘this is clearly your lucky day. Lucky for you that the weather’s so bad. It’s not really the day for a picnic, is it? I guess I have no choice. I’ll just have to go back to your place, and let you do wild and wicked things to me.’

Then suddenly, she was totally serious.

‘That was a terrific thought, though. No man has ever made a picnic for me before. We mustn’t waste it.’

And she stretched into the back of the car, brought the flask to her, and poured herself – and Nathan – a shared cup of coffee.

Sipping it, and again silent, Maria rested back against the car seat one final time. She curled up in her moving sofa, looked beyond Nathan, saw the world outside slipping gently by, and realized that they were now on roads that she had never driven before. The interstate was far behind them, the road now narrow, winding, lined with trees. The houses they past each stood alone, well-manicured gardens stretching out on either side to keep them apart; and then suddenly, as the car slowed, they were at the road end. She saw one final house, on the right as they approached. It was red-brick, two-storied, old and run down – and beyond it, a driveway, solid red-brick pillars marking its entrance, the gap between them wide enough for two cars to pass with ease. It was between those pillars that he took her, sweeping the Impala down a curving path and round one final bend, to bring them at last to the secret house nestled in the trees that Maria was so keen to see.

III

Nathan's secret house was in reality a detached garage, a unit for two cars with a tiny apartment above, pushed so far back into the woods that trees overshadowed it on three of its four sides. The only way in to the apartment was through the garage itself, a garage whose automatic door rose and fell only to the dictates of the tiny control unit hidden in the glove compartment of Nathan's car.

'It's like Fort Knox,' he told her. 'Only the select few know how to get in'.

He was the main one with the knowledge, of course, so he effortlessly swept her straight into the garage, and had the doors close silently behind them even before the car came to its final rest. In that instant they were suddenly, and for the first time in their short existence together, totally private and safe – completely sealed from the world outside. In their new found – and for her, entirely unexpected – cocoon of privacy, Maria silently marveled at the scale of her good fortune. Nathan's garage could not have been built better for her needs.

He was at most only marginally aware – so early in their time together – of how central to her were these needs for privacy and escape. So he missed the moment when the garage held her. It was the apartment on which he had set his sights, and into which he now moved her.

'Come in,' he said. 'Look around and make yourself at home.'

They entered the apartment through its galley kitchen on the garage level, squeezing between its cupboards, heading for the stairs beyond. The kitchen was long and narrow. The stairs were steep and backward bending. The space into which they led was tiny and sparsely furnished. In fact, small though it was, the space above the garage was itself split into three – a living area, a bedroom and a bathroom – all three set deep in the eaves, all three better designed for sitting than for standing.

'Is this your furniture?' she asked, eyeing a battered sofa and the simple bed that, along with the table and the stereo-center, was virtually all the furniture that the apartment possessed.

'No. All my things are still stored in Chicago. The only thing here that's really mine is the clarinet.'

'Let's make some more coffee?' Maria was already squeezing back down the stairs again, heading for the kitchen and its cupboards.

'Are you sure you want coffee?' he asked her, 'I think I'd prefer champagne.'

Nathan's fridge suddenly yielded a bottle and a platter – the platter already laid with salmon, olives, pita and dips.

'So', she grinned at him, 'it wasn't just a picnic that you prepared'.

'No', he replied jauntily, 'it was not. But the picnic's still in the car, if you prefer that.'

She laughed, 'Heavens, no! Champagne and salmon will do just fine.'

Suitably fed and watered, they then moved back upstairs and settled on the sofa. As he passed the stereo-center, Nathan turned it on. In all the possible scenarios that he'd run through his mind that weekend, on how their first morning together might begin, he'd never had the courage to anticipate that it would be this easy. He'd steadfastly assumed that he would have to draw her to this place, that he would bring her here – if he brought her at all – only at the culmination of a drawn out courtship, and as the prize for a long apprenticeship as confidante and friend. But here she was, already settled on his sofa, with him poised to release upon her his music of seduction. He didn't start with jazz. That was something he would take her to later. He started instead with music that he thought likely to be nearer to her tastes, and music whose words spoke overtly (as jazz could not) to their immediate needs and concerns that morning. He started with the beautiful and melodic meanderings of Roberta Flack.

The first time ever I saw your face, I thought the sun shone in your eyes

The music began quiet and low, demanding (and receiving) their full attention.

*And the moon and the stars were the gift you gave
To the dark and the endless sky, my love, to the dark and the endless sky.*

They sat quietly, close together now on the sofa, letting the music lap around them.

*The first time ever I kissed your mouth
I felt the earth move in my hands
Like the trembling heart of a captive bird
That was there at my command, my love, that was there at my command*

As the second stanza faded, Maria put down her glass and moved to the very edge of the sofa, turning her body towards him. She leaned forward to the rhythm of the music, taking his empty hand and gripping it tightly. As the music rose again, she dropped her locks of black hair over his hand and onto his knees, her face now entirely hidden from view, his captive hand drawn to her mouth - she kissing the tip of each of its fingers in turn, holding them within her lips and drawing them into her by the very pressure and longevity of the kiss.

*The first time ever I lay with you,
I felt your heart so close to mine.*

*And I knew our joy would fill the earth
And would last to the end of time, my love. It would last to the end of time.*

It was Nathan's turn now. He pulled Maria to him, both of them half-sitting, half lying on the sofa, their sides against its back, their faces inches apart. Gently, he pulled his hand away from her kiss, held her head, swept a stray lock of hair off her face, and returned the kiss. His kiss too rose and fell with the music.

It would last to the end of time, my love. It would last to the end of time.

As the music faded, her eyes full of tears, Maria leaned past him, to her shoulder bag beyond.

'I have something for you,' she said. 'Let me give it to you, before I forget.'

The gift was a drawing, done from memory, done in charcoal, of his face and shoulders seen from afar – the product of all those weeks of intense studying of his every feature from the back of the class.

'The eyes are wrong,' she said. 'They were so difficult to capture from far away. I'll do them better next time...close up....with long studio sessions.'

Her voice was so low, so emotional now, that he could hardly hear it. It was as though she was talking to herself rather more than to him.

'We must have lots of next times...lots and lots.'

As she spoke she ran her fingers over his face, tracing for them both the way she thought she'd failed quite to capture the setting and tone of his eyes.

'I have something to say,' he said, his face now once more only inches from hers.

'What is it?'

'It's early days, I know'. He was speaking very slowly, and very low. '...but I think...you do know, don't you, that I am falling in love with you.'

She put the tip of the index finger of her right hand quickly and lightly on his lips.

'Hush,' she said, as slowly and emotionally as he, 'I feel it too...but no words yet. We mustn't tempt the gods. Words will come later. Right now just take me to bed.'

Then strangely, once in the bedroom, Maria's confidence completely deserted her. Her sense of herself as a viable lover for Nathan vanished in the face of his bed. Standing

before him, he poised to kiss her, she literally froze, hit by an unfocused wave of panic and fear. Nathan saw that freeze, and his heart went out to her in her unexpected distress. His concern showed both in what he said and how he said it. Softly, his hands gently resting on each of her shoulders.

‘It’s quite a moment, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it is.’ There was a long pause.

‘I’m so sorry’, Maria said, looking up at him through those eyelashes again, ‘I can’t imagine what’s come over me. Suddenly, without a hint of it coming, my head’s full of other things – children, home, memories. Nathan, I’m suddenly frightened. I’m not sure I can even do this.’

‘It’s not surprising, this is a very big step. It just needs to be taken one stage at a time. Do you want to go back into the living room? We don’t have to rush this, you know. There’s always another day.’

‘No, no, I don’t want to go back into the living room. What an amazing offer to make!’ And she shook her head, as if partly in disbelief at his kindness, and partly to free her mind of its unwelcome intruders. ‘No, I don’t want to go back into the living room. I want us to be lovers. I want you to take me to bed. I’ve wanted that for weeks now. I just need your help to get there, I think.’

Nathan’s voice, though still gentle, now took on a playful tone.

‘Well, madam,’ he said to her, ‘if that’s the case...as I understand it, the first thing that normally happens at moments like this is that lovers undress. May I have the privilege of removing your clothes?’ His voice dropped. ‘...the privilege of removing all your clothes’.

Maria’s reply was, if anything, quieter still.

‘Yes, of course you may... please...help yourself to whatever of me you want.’

She was dressed in a flowered blouse, buttoned to the neck, the blouse full in the sleeve, so buttoned also at each wrist. She’d come wearing a lot of buttons that morning. Nathan opened them all, slowly, one at a time, silent in his concentration throughout. He started at her neck, opening first one button and the next and the next, until he reached the waistband of her skirt. Lifting in turn her left hand and her right, he then unbuttoned each wrist too. The first wrist he had to lift. The second, Maria lifted for him. Silent herself, eyes lowered, she then felt his hands slip inside her blouse and across her shoulders. She felt the blouse slip off first her right shoulder and then her left, before being pulled out and away from the belt of her skirt and discarded to the floor. Still she did not move, and Nathan did not have her move. Instead, as their lips touched, his hands took first one bra

strap, and then a second, off shoulders that were in consequence suddenly entirely exposed. In spite of herself, Maria then shuddered.

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes, I’m fine.’ Her reply was as low and passionate as his question had been firm and gentle. ‘Yes, just fine. Please carry on... please don’t stop.’

But Nathan did stop. Removing entirely her now redundant bra, he paused briefly in his stripping of her to take in the beauty of her breasts. And they were beautiful to his eyes, more so indeed even than he’d imagined them to be when he’d thought about them in the days and weeks just passed. And he had thought about them many times in those weeks, particularly since the second meeting in the bookshop. He’d simply not anticipated quite how smoothly they would fall away from each other, or even how deep and generous a cleavage they’d make when totally uncovered. He’d not thought that they would fit so easily into his hands, or make so soft a curve across the top of her ribcage. And he’d not imagined the paleness of her nipples, or known how erect and tight they would stand before him, on this, his first sighting of them. He held her away from him for a moment, looking, absorbing the sight of her, enjoying the shapes and the colors he saw before him, his passion momentarily subsumed into a general wonderment.

‘You are beautiful’, he said to her, ‘quite amazingly so.’

She moved to deny it, but it was now his turn lightly and gently, but also quickly and firmly, to place the index finger of his left hand on her lips.

‘You are,’ he said, ‘it’s true. It’s not to be denied.’

Nor indeed was he. Totally focused now, Nathan’s hands moved across each breast in turn, before sliding down to unravel what remained of Maria’s clothing still in place. Her eyes followed those hands down. She watched him unfasten the belt of her skirt. She saw him unbutton and unzip its side catch. She felt it fall effortlessly to the floor. Maria then stood immobile in the ring created by her own skirt, her nyloned legs stretching down into the circle that his stripping of her had created for them both: her breasts for the moment again untouched, her arms by her side. Not with a push, more with a lowering of her body, Nathan then laid her back onto the edge of the bed. He positioned her with her naked back on the sheets, her nyloned feet on the ground, her legs slightly apart; and with her so positioned, he moved to finish her undoing. His hands moved to the top of her right leg, slipped into the top of the band of her nylon, and rolled the nylon down – past her knee, along her calf, and over and off her foot. Then, and she did not expect this, he paused to unravel the nylon with great care, and to lay it beside her. She swallowed, and waited, as she felt him strip her of her second nylon: but this time his hands never left her body. Instead they moved with tantalizing lack of pace back up each naked leg in turn to find her suspender belt and panties: and then they too were gone.

She was easier now – that Nathan knew – but as yet she was nowhere back to the exhilaration and excitement of the Maria in the car – and that he knew too. It was as if, in entering the final room on their route to bed, the sum total of their confidence had itself hit some unseen barrier. As his went up, hers went down; for this was her first lover's room. She'd never been here before – and her confidence in her ability to arrive here with him was not matched by any sense in her that, once here, she could retain her right to stay by the quality of her performance as a lover. She knew that her beauty had opened the door; but with the lights out, what would that score? She thought probably very little. He, by contrast, had been here, and more than once. He'd never been here with anyone of her beauty, but down the decade he'd shared his bed on occasion with a number of very attractive women. In relation to Maria, Nathan's fear had been that, precisely because of her beauty, this moment between them would not happen. But now that it had, he saw that he mustn't spoil it with speed. Instead of kissing her, caressing her, and launching himself upon her – as in truth, given her past sexual experiences, Maria expected him immediately to do – he had the sense to realize that he had more courting before him, and he teased her accordingly.

Covering her with a sheet, and slipping out of his own clothes as he did so, he reset the tone of his voice. Less the lover now than the storyteller, he asked the still waiting Maria: 'are you sitting comfortably? Can we begin?'

Maria heard the resetting and understood its intent. 'Nathan,' she said, pulling him to her. 'I may not be very good at this. I do hope that you won't be disappointed.'

'Maria, this isn't a test. You're not being scored here. Heaven knows, I may not be much good for you this morning either. We're beginners, you and I. This is something we have to learn.' Then, much lighter, 'don't tell me that you thought having an affair was easy, did you? You have been in training, haven't you?'

'Training, no! What training is that?'

'Well, that varies a little. For guys, it's largely a matter of push-ups. For girls, it's more a matter of moaning training. Have you done your moaning training lately?'

Maria was laughing now. 'Moaning training? No, I haven't done any moaning training lately. At least I don't think I have. How do you do moaning training?'

'Like this!'

He began with a running commentary. 'First we just caress your nipples between the fingers'; and she felt his thumb and first finger settle on her right nipple, then on her left, caressing each gently in turn, and sending a line of passion down straight into her womb.

She gasped, but he was already gone, following the line of passion himself. There was no running commentary now. His lips replaced his fingers in the gentle caressing and sucking of her nipples, leaving his hands free to move down the sides of her body and into her great crop of jet-black pubic hair. His fingers were into her now, probing, searching, finding her. She felt the pressure of his hands opening her thighs, and she moved, accommodating his requirement, sinking her head back still further into the pillow as she did so. His fingers worked her clitoris steadily, leaving it only occasionally to probe deep within her for the juice such caressing required. Working her with immense gentleness, Maria's lover held steadily to his task without respite or sound – his fingers at one end of her body, his mouth at the other – until very slowly and entirely involuntarily, she broke the silence with a moan. He heard the moan, persisted for a moment as she moaned on, and then came up for air.

‘There you see. You do know how to moan. I knew you did.’

There was laughter and gentleness in his voice as he lay there, kissing her, caressing her breasts still, but now with hands sticky with the juice of her passion. He licked his fingers, and stroked them over her face.

‘See, you taste really good. Did you know?’

She did not, in fact; but that no longer mattered to her. His gentleness and humor had totally washed away her panic and her fear. This kind of sexual pleasure had never happened to her before. She literally hadn't known that it could. She hadn't known that men could take pleasure in her pleasure, could wait on hers before taking their own; but here it was, happening to her, in the sunlight of Nathan's bedroom and under the impact of only the tiniest amount of champagne. Maria already knew that she was in new emotional territory now: territory to which Nathan then took her again, but this time without any coming up for air.

He kissed her breasts with his lips. He caressed her with his fingers. He listened to the rise and fall of her breathing. He periodically opened and caressed her thighs, and he kept at her – all gentleness but all focus – until she felt herself going, losing any sense of control, sweeping away to a pitch of pleasure that stood on the edge of pain. She moaned then. How she moaned then. But still he caressed her until, screaming with the pleasure of it, she gripped her thighs tight around his hand, blocking any more caressing, and peaked in a moment of sheer ecstasy. And then she fell back, overwhelmed by what he had raised in her, aware of just how much of herself she had already shown to him, and yet feeling strangely safe, totally unexposed.

As she recovered her breath, and he retrieved his champagne glass, her quizzing began.

‘Where did you learn to do that?’ It was a sigh more than a question.

‘In the boy scouts, actually. We were a very progressive troop. I even have a badge for it.’

‘I bet you do.’ She was all lightness herself now. ‘You’re very good at it.’

‘It’s a woodcraft badge,’ he went on. Maria laughed. ‘You had to be able to rub your fingers together and produce fire! Later on, if you passed well, you got to take the field-sports badge as well.’

‘Is that what this is?’ she laughed, ‘a field-sport!’

‘No, I never got that far. I could never imagine rubbing my fingers together in a field – far too uncomfortable, full of bugs. So I never got to do it.’

‘You mean this is your first time?’ Maria’s tone was light, but incredulous.

‘Well, almost. I have to admit that I took some of the training program. But yes, a virgin boy scout, that’s me.’

Maria was laughing helplessly by now. ‘That I don’t believe for a moment.’

But Nathan was suddenly deadly serious, yet very gentle.

‘Maria. We’re both virgins here. Nothing has ever happened in this bed that’s anything like you. Virginity – for lovers – is something they lose together.’

And he kissed her, very gently, but with huge passion.

‘It’s time.’

Maria nodded, and drew in her breath with such ferocity that his gentleness momentarily left him; so that he literally fell on her: kissing her, caressing her, sliding his hands from her neck to her breasts and from her breasts to her thighs, moving his tongue from deep in her mouth to first her nipples and then down, down, down, into pubic hair wet with sweat and into a vagina soft with the need of him. One movement more, and he was deep into her; and they were together, rocking backwards and forwards ever more rapidly in their growing passion. But even now he did not come quickly. Her initial passivity and fear had moved him too much, pushed him back, quieted him, made him almost reverential in the face of her nakedness. But he felt her excitement grow under him as their bodies moved together: and as their lips locked and her passion flowed, so his passion also returned. For her arms were now tight on his back, nails digging deep with each thrust. They were in his hair, tugging and scratching as he thrust again. They were fixed like a metal band around his buttocks, pulling him into her harder and further. They were even momentarily over her head, as she arched her back beneath him, having him ride her like a wild horse. And then suddenly her hands were on his face, pushing it up off her lips so that she could see him, and he her, as her passion raced to its end. Her face took on an amazing look – not just of passion, but of passion mixed with something akin to

incredulity, even to fear – passion, incredulity and fear that came together in a single huge and piercing scream, and a devastating tightening of her vagina.

‘Take me!’ ‘Take me!’ ‘Now’, ‘Now’, ‘Oh God, what have you done to me?’ ‘Take me, take me, for pity’s sake, Take me!’

Then Nathan did. He simply flowed into her, totally lost in the flood of passion that she had ordered up in him. So it was that even in this, their first coupling, they came to their climaxes together, each calling out in their turn. Having peaked together, they also collapsed together: lying as an interwoven bundle of naked arms and legs in his now entirely disheveled bed – breathing heavily, totally exhausted, deeply shaken by what they had done, and by what each had found in the other. For each of them, the morning had indeed been far more than they had either anticipated or hoped. They were the other side of passion now, and both of them knew that there could be no going back.