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A Much Married Man

Nicholas Coleridge

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Extract

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1965: Winchford Priory

Anthony Anscombe could remember the precise moment he fell madly and irrevocably in love with Amanda Gibbons.

He had been watching the guests arrive at Winchford Priory from the gallery that ran the width of the Great Hall. Originally built for minstrels, the gallery was used by Godfrey Anscombe, Anthony's father, as a handy place in which to store cigars, paper clips and elastic bands in the drawers of an old desk. The reason Anthony was lurking in the gallery, rather than chatting up his parents' neighbours downstairs, was that he wasn't in the mood for this party. Godfrey and Henrietta Anscombe's annual fork supper, held in the same week each October, drew a predictable and, in Anthony's view, thoroughly tedious crowd of local worthies. Three months after leaving school, and two weeks after his eighteenth birthday, he would rather have been meeting some mates in a local pub than doing his bit to entertain the county.

Already there must have been sixty or seventy people milling about downstairs, and continual ascending gusts of icy air as the great oak front door opened and closed heralded ever more guests piling inside from the bitter October night. Fires blazed in the stone hearths at opposite ends of the hall, and dishes of pheasant casserole were being set up on hotplates along a trestle table. One entire wall was hung with Elizabethan portraits of Anscombe ancestors.

The door reopened and Anthony recognised the new arrivals as the Edwardses, who had recently bought Brasenose Farm in Steeple Barford. Several stragglers his own age hovered in their wake, swathed in scarves and overcoats. That was when he caught sight of Amanda. It took him

less than a second to realise she was the most enchanting girl he'd ever set eyes on.

She had glanced up to the ceiling with its massive oak beams and spotted Anthony skulking in the gallery, holding his stare in a way he found disconcerting and vaguely flirtatious. Her eyes were huge and black, ringed with kohl, and her hair, also black, was straight and cut into a short bob. She cocked her head to one side in a speculative summons he found irresistible: 'Well, are you coming down here or aren't you?'

He sped down to the Great Hall as though in the pull of some mighty ocean current drawing him towards the sooty-eyed girl. He found her still lingering in a small group with the Edwardses, whom Anthony hardly knew. Charlie Edwards, twenty-one, rodent-faced and smoking, had one arm draped around the girl's back, signalling some kind of proprietorial entitlement. Close up, she was even more enticing than she'd appeared from above. Having shed her overcoat, she was dressed like an eighteenth-century highwayman in black frock coat, breeches and gauntlets. Large paste buckles gleamed on her boots.

'Do you normally lurk upstairs during your own parties?' she asked him.

She had high, delicate cheekbones and luminous white skin. Hopeless at estimating girls' ages, having been educated among boys, he reckoned she must be seventeen or eighteen.

'Not normally. I just didn't feel particularly sociable this evening.' He found it difficult to think; her beauty made him anxious.

'I'm Amanda, in case you're wondering.'

'Anthony Anscombe.'

'I know. This is your party and your place.'

'Can I get you a drink or some food?'

'Charlie will do that, won't you, Charlie? No pheasant, if that's what it is. Just vegetables and potatoes, plenty of potatoes.'

'Don't you like pheasant?' Anthony asked.

'No, though red meat is one of my passions. I just loathe game – it's so gamey.'

As Charlie, with evident reluctance, joined the queue for the food, standing in line behind the racing trainers and foxhunting men, solicitors and stockbrokers who comprised the Anscombes' friends, Amanda leant against one of the two overpowering Italianate marble chimneypieces that dominated both ends of the room. Anthony felt momentarily shy, and wished he was less boringly dressed. Six foot two inches tall, and conventionally handsome with short black hair, he realised he lacked dazzle in his grey suit and dark tie. Heart racing, he tried desperately

to think of something interesting to say to this mesmerising girl before Charlie returned with her food. Across the room, he saw his mother staring in their direction, frowning, wondering who this girl was. Then Amanda said, 'Would you show me round your house? Or am I supposed to pay for a guided tour?'

'Er, sure, why not? Of course I can show you, if you want. It's a good excuse to get out of here. But I warn you, it's really not that interesting unless you go in for mullioned windows and moth-eaten tapestries.'

As they left the hall Amanda brushed his arm, and her touch shot through him with an adrenalin rush.

Anthony had led tours of Winchford Priory several times before. The house wasn't open to the public, but there were tours in aid of the local nurses and hospice, for the Tories and the pony club, garden organisations and enthusiasts for vernacular architecture who came to see the linen-fold panelling in the library. He had developed a route around the house which began with the four large reception rooms downstairs, took in the long gallery with its Tudor portraits and a couple of older bedrooms – or 'chambers' as they were known, the Judge's Chamber and the Assize Chamber – and ended up on the roof, with its turrets and distant views towards Warwickshire and Stratford-upon-Avon. He could go into any room and, without even thinking, reel off the facts about soot-blackened armorial firescreens and floorboards refashioned from the decking of British frigates. Tonight he could barely get the words out and heard himself trip over the simplest phrases. Amanda had the sexiest mouth and most provocative smile he had ever seen.

'Are you always so shy?' she demanded. 'You didn't look shy when I saw you up there in the gallery.'

'Me, shy? Not at all. What an odd question. I'll show you the Assize Chamber next, shall I? It's where they used to hold monthly courts at one time; the circuit magistrates convened at Winchford Priory and all the local trials were held here.'

'I'd rather see the roof,' Amanda said. 'It's smoky in this house. I need air.'

'Then we have to go up this rickety staircase. Watch your head – the ceiling gets quite low.'

Anthony stooped at the top of the stone stair and eased open the bolts of the trapdoor. Amanda placed her warm hands on top of his and pretended to help.

They emerged onto the roof, where a leaded walkway, eighteen inches wide, ran round the perimeter of the slates, linking four large turrets. The parapet was castellated, and several precarious pink-brick chimney-

stacks tottered above them. Afterwards, Anthony recalled how dark the starless night was, the blackest he could remember.

After some fumbling about, he found the right switches for two or three dusty lights set into walls of the turrets, but Amanda said, 'No, leave them off. I like it better this way. Shhh, don't say a thing; listen to the silence. The wind in the treetops. There's nothing – you can't hear one car.'

Just then the stillness was shattered by a blast of soul music from the Great Hall: The Drifters' 'Up on the Roof'.

Amanda laughed. 'How corny is that? On the roof it's peaceful as can be, and the world below can't bother me.' I think that's how it goes; you can't hear the words clearly. I've always detested that song. It's the pits. Anthony, you didn't lay it on specially, did you?'

'Nothing to do with me, I assure you. It's just the disco. There's supposed to be dancing.'

'Maybe we should go back down.' She gave him a measuring look, as though trying to work out what he wanted. 'Charlie will be wondering where I am. He goes all possessive at parties.'

'Is he . . . ?' Anthony's voice trailed away.

'My boyfriend? Sort of. Kind of. He thinks he should be; let's put it that way. Technically the answer is still no.' She smiled. 'Shall we dance? I've always wanted to do that, dance on a big old rooftop.'

And so they swayed together, awkwardly at first, to the record Amanda said she detested, and to Anthony it felt not quite real, to be dancing with this beautiful girl who made him dumb and powerless with yearning, on the roof of his own house on this arctic October night while the music filtered up through the slates from far below. When the record changed to something slower, Amanda held on to him, so they were properly slow dancing, and Anthony shuddered at her touch.

'If this was my home,' Amanda said, 'I'd live up here all the time in these turrets. One would be our bedroom, another could be our sitting room, a bathroom and . . . kitchen, I suppose.'

Anthony heard only: *our* bedroom, *our* sitting room.

'They're filthy dirty inside, and some of the doors have warped so they're jammed shut. That one at the front's still okay, I used to have it as a hobbies room when I was eleven. But they could probably be repaired.'

'Are they still there – your hobbies, I mean? Can I see?'

So they walked along the leads to the west tower, and Anthony put his shoulder to the door and found the light, and they entered the circular brick room, which had a workbench fixed to the wall. The place still bore faint fumes of paint and turpentine and the floor was littered with bat

droppings. Dangling from the ceiling on lengths of cotton were a dozen model aircraft constructed from kits – Spitfires, Stukas and Hurricane bombers – and the workbench was covered with tiny, dried-up tins of acrylic paint, and Anthony's childhood butterfly collecting kit.

'As you can see, no one's been in here for ages,' Anthony said. 'Look at the bat shit everywhere. I'm surprised the bats haven't collided with the planes, actually.'

'It's radar,' Amanda said. 'Bats have this amazing radar. They can find their way in the dark.' Then, with startling speed, she flicked the light switch so they were plunged back into darkness. 'Okay, Anthony, before your eyes acclimatise, you have to find me. I'm going to move about very slowly. All you have to do is touch me. And watch out for your aeroplanes; if you knock into one, it'll give away where you are.'

They edged around the turret, feeling their way in the gloom, listening for any movement that would betray each other's position. Anthony held on to the workbench with one hand while shielding his face from the dangling warplanes, inching his way in the confined space. Sometimes he thought he heard Amanda's cat-like tread, tantalisingly close, but when he moved in that direction she eluded him.

'Amanda? You still in here?'

He heard the softest of whispers. 'I am. But you have to find me.'

'Where on earth are you? I've been round this damn turret twice and you're not anywhere.'

'Then you'll have to persevere. Enjoy it. It's a game.'

This time the voice seemed to come from close behind. Groping in the darkness, his fingers found warm, soft skin. At first he thought it must be her face, then he discovered it was the side of a breast. To his astonishment, it was naked.

'Christ, Amanda. Your clothes . . .'

She laughed. 'Does it shock you?'

'No, just slightly surprised for a second. But, well, great—'

She took his face in her hands and pushed her tongue between his lips, pressing herself against him. Amazed, confused, exhilarated, he kissed her back passionately.

Then he heard the urgency and fierceness of her whisper: 'Fall in love with me, Anthony. I dare you to fall in love with me.'

Before he could reply, they heard footsteps outside on the leads and a male voice calling, 'Amanda? Amanda, you up here?'

'God, it's Charlie.' She cursed, suddenly recoiling. 'Why the hell does he have to show up now?'

Anthony heard her struggle back into her frock coat, and moments

later open the turret door, flicking the light back on as she did so. 'Charlie? We're over here. Anthony's showing me his aeroplanes. Come and see.'

Charlie loomed in the doorway, taut with suspicion. 'I've been searching everywhere for you. No one knew where you were. Didn't you hear me calling? You mustn't just disappear like that.' Spotting Anthony, he eyed him with hostility, then flicked a dismissive glance at the plastic models dangling from their threads. 'These are what you and Amanda have been looking at all this time?' he sneered. 'You make them all by yourself from kits, do you? You stick the transfers onto the fuselages yourself?'

'Used to,' Anthony said. 'I haven't made one for ages.' He stole a glance at Amanda, who was standing between them, innocent and noncommittal.

'Anyway, we've got to leave now,' Charlie said, grabbing hold of Amanda's hand and yanking her in the direction of the door. 'We need to be getting back. I still haven't packed.'

Anthony followed them across the roof and re-bolted the door behind him. Charlie and Amanda were twenty yards ahead along the corridor and had reached the top of the staircase that led back down to the Great Hall.

He hastened to catch them up. Hearing his approaching footsteps, Charlie turned and glared, then strode on downstairs.

'Amanda?' Anthony called after her.

She paused, looked back at him and murmured, 'Remember what I told you.'

'What was that?'

'I dared you something.'

'I do remember.'

'Then *accept my dare*,' she whispered. 'I shall be disappointed in you if you don't.' Then she hurried on to join Charlie, who was fuming impatiently by the front door.