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The Night Watch

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Extract

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1947

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So this, said Kay to herself, *is the sort of person you've become: a person whose clocks and wrist-watches have stopped, and who tells the time, instead, by the particular kind of cripple arriving at her landlord's door.*

For she was standing at her open window, in a collarless shirt and a pair of greyish underpants, smoking a cigarette and watching the coming and going of Mr Leonard's patients. Punctually, they came—so punctually, she really could tell the time by them: the woman with the crooked back, on Mondays at ten; the wounded soldier, on Thursdays at eleven. On Tuesdays at one an elderly man came, with a fey-looking boy to help him: Kay enjoyed watching for them. She liked to see them making their slow way up the street: the man neat and dark-suited as an undertaker, the boy patient, serious, handsome—like an allegory of youth and age, she thought, as done by Stanley Spencer or some finicky modern painter like that. After them there came a woman with her son, a little lame boy in spectacles; after that, an elderly Indian lady with rheumatics. The little lame boy would sometimes stand scuffing up moss and dirt from the broken path to the house with his great boot, while his mother spoke with Mr Leonard in the hall. Once, recently, he'd looked up and seen Kay watching; and she'd heard him making a fuss on the stairs, then, about going on his own to the lavatory.

'Is it them angels on the door?' she had heard his mother say. 'Good heavens, they're only pictures! A great boy like you!'

Kay guessed it wasn't Mr Leonard's lurid Edwardian angels that frightened him, but the thought of encountering her. He must have supposed she haunted the attic floor like a ghost or a lunatic.

He was right, in a way. For sometimes she walked restlessly about, just as lunatics were said to. And other times she'd sit still, for hours at a time—stiller than a shadow, because she'd watch the shadows creeping across the rug. And then it seemed to her that she really might be a ghost, that she might be becoming part of the faded fabric of the house, dissolving into the gloom which gathered, like dust, in its crazy angles.

A train ran by, two streets away, heading into Clapham Junction; she felt the thrill and shudder of it in the sill beneath her arms. The bulb in a lamp behind her shoulder sprang into life, flickered for a second like an irritated eye, and then went out. The clinker in the fireplace—a brutal little fireplace; this had been a room for a servant, once—gently collapsed. Kay took a final draw on her cigarette, then pinched out the flame of it between her forefinger and thumb.

She had been standing at her window for more than an hour. It was a Tuesday: she'd seen a snub-nosed man with a wasted arm arrive, and had been waiting, in a vague kind of way, for the Stanley Spencer couple. But now she'd decided to give up on them. She'd decided to go out. The day was fine, after all: a day in the middle of a warm September, the third September after the war. She went through to the room, next to this one, that she used as a bedroom, and began to get changed.

The room was dim. Some of the window-glass had been lost, and Mr Leonard had replaced it with lino. The bed was high, with a balding candlewick bedspread: the sort of bed which turned your thoughts, not pleasantly, to the many people who must, over the years, have slept on it, made love on it, been born on it, died on it, thrashed around on it in fevers. It gave off a slightly sour

scent, like the feet of worn stockings. But Kay was used to that, and didn't notice. The room was nothing to her but a place in which to sleep or to lie sleepless. The walls were empty, featureless, just as they had been when she'd moved in. She'd never hung up a picture or put out books; she had no pictures or books; she didn't have much of anything. Only, in one of the corners, had she fixed up a length of wire; and on this, on wooden hangers, she kept her clothes.

The clothes, at least, were very neat. She picked her way through them now and found a pair of nicely darned socks, and some tailored slacks. She changed her shirt to a cleaner one, a shirt with a soft white collar she could leave open at the throat, as a woman might.

But her shoes were men's shoes; she spent a minute polishing them up. And she put silver links in her cuffs, then combed her short brown hair with brushes, making it neat with a touch of grease. People seeing her pass in the street, not looking at her closely, often mistook her for a good-looking youth. She was regularly called 'young man', and even 'son', by elderly ladies. But if anyone gazed properly into her face, they saw at once the marks of age there, saw the white threads in her hair; and in fact she would be thirty-seven on her next birthday.

When she went downstairs she stepped as carefully as she could, so as not to disturb Mr Leonard; but it was hard to be soft-footed, because of the creaking and popping of the stairs. She went to the lavatory, then spent a couple of minutes in the bathroom, washing her face, brushing her teeth. Her face was lit up rather greenishly, because ivy smothered the window. The water knocked and spluttered in the pipes. The geyser had a spanner hanging beside it, for sometimes the water stuck completely—and then you had to bang the pipes about a bit to make it fire.

The room beside the bathroom was Mr Leonard's treatment-room, and Kay could hear, above the sound of the toothbrush in her own mouth and the splash of water in the basin, his passionate

monotone, as he worked on the snub-nosed man with the wasted arm. When she let herself out of the bathroom and went softly past his door, the monotone grew louder. It was like the throb of some machine.

'Eric,' she caught, 'you must *hmm-hmm*. How can *buzz-buzz* when *hmm-buzz* whole again?'

She stepped very stealthily down the stairs, opened the unlatched front door, and stood for a moment on the step—almost hesitating, now. The whiteness of the sky made her blink. The day seemed limp, suddenly: not fine so much as dried out, exhausted. She thought she could feel dust, settling already on her lips, her lashes, in the corners of her eyes. But she wouldn't turn back. She had, as it were, her own brushed hair to live up to; her polished shoes, her cuff-links. She went down the steps and started to walk. She stepped like a person who knew exactly where they were going, and why they were going there—though the fact was, she had nothing to do, and no one to visit, no one to see. Her day was a blank, like all of her days. She might have been inventing the ground she walked on, laboriously, with every step.

She headed west, through well-swept, devastated streets, towards Wandsworth.

'No sign of Colonel Barker today, Uncle Horace,' said Duncan, looking up at the attic windows as he and Mr Mundy drew closer to the house.

He was rather sorry. He liked to see Mr Leonard's lodger. He liked the bold cut of her hair, her mannish clothes, her sharp, distinguished-looking profile. He thought she might once have been a lady pilot, a sergeant in the WAAF, something like that: one of those women, in other words, who'd charged about so happily during the war, and then got left over. 'Colonel Barker' was Mr Mundy's name for her. He liked to see her standing there, too. At Duncan's words he looked up, and nodded; but then he put down his head again and moved on, too out of breath to speak.

He and Duncan had come all the way to Lavender Hill from White City. They had to come slowly, getting buses, stopping to rest; it took almost the whole day to get here and home again afterwards. Duncan had Tuesday as his regular day off, and made the hours up on a Saturday. They were very good about it, at the factory where he worked. 'That boy's devoted to his uncle!' he'd heard them say, many times. They didn't know that Mr Mundy wasn't actually his uncle. They had no idea what kind of treatment he received from Mr Leonard; probably they thought he went to a hospital. Duncan let them think what they liked.

He led Mr Mundy into the shadow of the crooked house. The house always looked at its most alarming, he thought, when looming over you like this. For it was the last surviving building in what had once, before the war, been a long terrace; it still had the scars, on either side, where it had been attached to its neighbours, the zig-zag of phantom staircases and the dints of absent hearths. What held it up, Duncan couldn't imagine; he'd never quite been able to shake off the feeling, as he let himself and Mr Mundy into the hall, that he'd one day close the door a shade too hard and the whole place would come tumbling down around them.

So he closed the door softly; and after that the house seemed more ordinary. The hall was dim and rather hushed; there were hard-backed chairs set all the way around it, a coatless coat-rack, and two or three pallid-looking plants; the floor was a pattern of white-and-black tiles, some of which had got lost, exposing the grey cement beneath. The shade of the light was a lovely rose-coloured porcelain shell—meant for a gas-lamp, probably, but now fitted up with a bulb in a bakelite socket and a fraying brown flex.

Duncan noticed flaws and features like this; it was one of the pleasures of life for him. The earlier they arrived at the house, the more he liked it, for that gave him time to help Mr Mundy to a chair and then wander quietly around the hall, looking everything over. He admired the finely turned banisters, and the

stair-rods with their tarnished brass ends. He liked the discoloured ivory knob on a cupboard door; and the paint on the skirting-boards, which had been combed to look like wood. But at the back of the passage that led to the basement was a bamboo table, set out with tawdry ornaments; and amongst the plaster dogs and cats, the paperweights and majolica vases, was his favourite thing of all: an old lustre bowl, very beautiful, with a design of serpents and fruits. Mr Leonard kept dusty walnuts in it, with a pair of iron nutcrackers on the top, and Duncan never approached the bowl without feeling, as if in the fibres of his bones, the fatal little concussion that would occur if some careless person were to take the nutcrackers up and let them slip against the china.

The walnuts sat in the bowl today just as usual, however, the layer of dust upon them woolly, undisturbed; and Duncan had time, too, to look quite closely at a couple of pictures hanging crookedly on the wall—for everything hung crookedly, in this house. They turned out to be rather commonplace, with very ordinary Oxford frames. But that gave him a sense of pleasure, too—a different sort of pleasure—the pleasure he got from looking at a moderately handsome thing and thinking, *You're not mine, and I don't have to want you!*

When there was movement in the room upstairs, he stepped nimbly back to Mr Mundy's side. A door had opened on the landing, and he heard voices: it was Mr Leonard, seeing out the young man who always had the hour before them. Duncan liked seeing this man, almost as much as he liked seeing Colonel Barker and the lustre bowl; for the man was cheery. He might be a sailor. 'All right, mates?' he said today, giving Duncan a bit of a wink. He asked what the weather was doing now, and enquired after Mr Mundy's arthritis—all the while removing a cigarette from its packet, then putting it to his mouth, taking out a box of matches and striking a light: all perfectly easily and naturally with one hand, while the other, undeveloped arm hung at his side.

Why did he come, Duncan always wondered, when he could

get along so well just as he was? He thought that perhaps the young man wanted a sweetheart; for of course, the arm was something a girl might object to.

The young man tucked the box of matches back into his pocket and went on his way. Mr Leonard led Duncan and Mr Mundy upstairs—going slowly, of course; letting Mr Mundy set the pace.

'Blinking nuisance,' said Mr Mundy. 'What can you do with me? Put me on the scrap-heap.'

'Now, now!' said Mr Leonard.

He and Duncan helped Mr Mundy into the treatment-room. They lowered him into another hard-backed chair, took his jacket from him, made sure he was comfortable. Mr Leonard got out a black notebook and looked briefly inside it; then he sat facing Mr Mundy in a stiff chair of his own. Duncan went to the window and sat on a low sort of padded box that was there, with Mr Mundy's jacket in his lap. The window had a bitter-smelling net curtain across it, slightly sagging from a wire. The walls of the room were done in lincrusta, painted a glossy chocolate brown.

Mr Leonard rubbed his hands together. 'So,' he said. 'How are we, since I saw you last?'

Mr Mundy ducked his head. 'Not too bright,' he said.

'The idea of pains, still?'

'Can't seem to shake them off at all.'

'But you've had no resort to false remedies of any kind?'

Mr Mundy moved his head again, uneasily. 'Well,' he admitted after a second, 'perhaps a little aspirin.'

Mr Leonard drew in his chin and looked at Mr Mundy as if to say: *Dear, dear.* 'Now, you know very well, don't you,' he said, 'what a person is like, who employs false remedies and spiritual treatment at the same time? He is like an ass pulled by two masters; he moves nowhere. You do know this, don't you?'

'It's only,' said Mr Mundy, 'so awfully sore—'

'Soreness!' said Mr Leonard, with a mixture of amusement and great contempt. He shook his chair. 'Is this chair sore, because it

must support my weight? Why not, since the wood from which it is made is as material as the bone and muscle of your leg, which you say hurts from bearing *your* weight? It is because nobody believes that a chair *may* hurt. If you will only not believe in the hurt of your leg, that leg will become as negligible to you as wood is. Don't you know this?'

'Yes,' said Mr Mundy meekly.

'Yes,' repeated Mr Leonard. 'Now, let us make a start.'

Duncan sat very still. It was necessary to be very still and quiet through all of the session, but particularly now, while Mr Leonard was gathering his thoughts, gathering his strength, concentrating his mind so that he might be ready to take on the false idea of Mr Mundy's arthritis. He did this by slightly putting back his head and looking with great intensity, not at Mr Mundy, but at a picture he had hung over the mantelpiece, of a soft-eyed woman in a high-necked Victorian gown, whom Duncan knew to be the founder of Christian Science, Mrs Mary Baker Eddy. On the black frame of the picture someone—possibly Mr Leonard himself—had written a phrase, not very handily, in enamel paint. The phrase was: *Ever Stand Porter at the Gate of Thought.*

The words made Duncan want to laugh, every time: not because he found them especially comical, but simply because to laugh, just now, would be so dreadful; and he always, at this point, began to grow panicked at the thought of having to sit so silently, for so long: he felt he would be bound to make some sound, some movement—leap up, start shrieking, throw a fit . . . But it was too late. Mr Leonard had changed his pose—had leant forward and fixed Mr Mundy with his gaze. And when he spoke again, he spoke in a whisper, intently, with a tremendous sense of urgency and belief.

'Dear Horace,' he said, 'you must listen to me. All that you think about your arthritis is untrue. You have no arthritis. You have no pain. You are not subject to those thoughts and opinions, which have illness and pain as a law and condition of matter . . .

Dear Horace, listen. You have no fear. No memory frightens you. No memory makes you think misfortune will come to you again. You have nothing to fear, dear Horace. Love is with you. Love fills and surrounds you . . .'

The words went on and on—like a rain of gentle blows from a stern lover. It was impossible, Duncan thought—forgetting, now, his desire to laugh—not to want to surrender yourself to the passion of them; impossible not to want to be impressed, moved, persuaded. He thought of the young man with the wasted arm; he imagined the man sitting where Mr Mundy was now, being told, 'Love fills you', being told, 'You must not fear', and willing and willing his arm to lengthen, to flesh itself out. Could such a thing happen? Duncan wanted, for Mr Mundy's sake, and the young man's sake, to think that it could. He wanted it more than anything.

He looked at Mr Mundy. Soon after the start of the treatment he had closed his eyes; now, as the whispers went on, he began, very gently, to cry. The tears flowed thinly down his cheeks, they gathered at his throat and wet his collar. He made no attempt to catch them, but sat with his hands loosely in his lap, his neat, blunt fingers now and then twitching; and every so often he drew in his breath and let it out again in a great shuddering sigh.

'Dear Horace,' Mr Leonard was insisting, 'no mind has any power over you. I deny the power of thoughts of disorder over you. Disorder does not exist. I affirm the power of harmony over you, over every organ of you: the arms of you; the legs of you; the eyes and ears of you; the liver and kidneys of you; the heart and brain and stomach and loins of you. Those organs are perfect. Horace, hear me . . .'

He kept it up for forty-five minutes; then sat back, quite untired. Mr Mundy got out his handkerchief at last and blew his nose and wiped his face. But his tears had already dried; he stood without help, and seemed to walk a little easier, and be a little lighter in his mind. Duncan took him his jacket. Mr Leonard rose

and stretched, had a sip of water from a glass. When Mr Mundy paid him, he took the money with an air of great apology.

'And tonight, of course,' he said, 'I shall include you in my evening benediction. You'll be ready for that? Shall we say, half-past nine?' For he had many patients, Duncan knew, whom he never saw: patients who sent him money, and whom he worked on from a distance, or by letter and telephone.

He shook Duncan's hand. His palm was dry, his fingers soft and smooth as a girl's. He smiled, but his look was inward-seeming, like a mole's. He might, at that moment, have been blind.

And how awkward for him, Duncan thought suddenly, *if he were!*

The idea made him want to laugh again. When he and Mr Mundy were back on the path in front of the house, he did laugh; and Mr Mundy picked up his hilarity and began to laugh too. It was a sort of nervous reaction, to the room, the stillness, the barrage of gentle words. They caught one another's eye, as they left the shadow of the crooked house and walked towards Lavender Hill, and laughed like children.

'I shan't want a flighty sort of woman,' the man was saying. 'I had enough of that sort of thing with my last girl, I don't mind telling you.'

Helen said, 'We always advise our clients to keep as open a mind as possible, at this stage of things.'

The man said, 'Hmm. And an open wallet, too, I dare say.'

He wore a dark blue demob suit, already shiny at the elbows and the cuffs, and his face was sallow with a tired tropical tan. His hair was combed with fantastic neatness, the parting straight and white as a scar; but the oil had little crumbs of scurf caught in it, which kept drawing Helen's eye.

'I dated a WAAF once,' he was saying bitterly now. 'Every time we passed a jeweller's she'd just happen to turn her ankle—'

Helen drew out another sheet. 'What about this lady here? Let's see. Enjoys dressmaking and trips to the cinema.'

The man leant to look at the photograph and at once sat back, shaking his head. 'I don't care for girls in spectacles.'

'Now, remember my advice about the open mind?'

'I don't want to sound harsh,' he said, giving a quick glance at Helen's own rather sensible brown outfit. 'But a girl in spectacles—well, she's let herself down already. You've got to ask yourself what's going to go next.'

They went on like this for another twenty minutes; eventually, from the file of fifteen women that Helen had initially drawn up, they'd put together a list of five.

The man was disappointed, but hid his dismay in a show of aggression. 'So, what happens now?' he asked, pulling at his shiny cuffs. 'This lot are shown my ugly face, I suppose, and have to say whether or not they like the look of it. I can see already how that will turn out. Perhaps I should have had myself photographed with a five-pound note behind my ear.'

Helen imagined him at home that morning, choosing a tie, sponging his jacket, straightening and restraightening the parting in his hair.

She saw him down the stairs to the street. When she went back up to the waiting-room she looked at Viv, her colleague, and blew out her cheeks.

Viv said, 'Like that, was he? I did wonder. He wouldn't do for our lady from Forest Hill, I suppose?'

'He's after someone younger.'

'Aren't they all?' Viv stifled a yawn. On the desk before her was a diary. She patted her mouth, looking over the page. 'We've no one, now,' she said, 'for nearly half an hour. Let's have a cup of tea, shall we?'

'Oh, let's,' said Helen.

They moved about more briskly, suddenly, than they ever did when dealing with clients. Viv opened the lowest drawer of a filing cabinet and brought out a neat little electric kettle and a teapot. Helen took the kettle down to the lavatory on the landing and

filled it at the sink. She set it on the floor, plugged it into a socket in the skirting-board, then stood waiting. It took about three minutes to boil. The paper above the socket was rising, where steam had struck it in the past. She smoothed it down, as she did every day; it lay flat for a moment, then slowly curled back up.

The bureau was in two rooms above a wig-maker's, in a street behind Bond Street station. Helen saw the clients, individually, in the room at the front; Viv sat at her desk in the waiting-room, greeting them as they came in. There was a mismatched sofa and chairs, where people could sit when they came early. A Christmas cactus in a pot sent out occasional startling blooms. A low table held nearly current copies of *Lilliput* and *Reader's Digest*.

Helen had worked here since just after the end of the war; she'd taken it on as a temporary thing—something light-hearted, a contrast to her old job in a Damage Assistance department in Marylebone Town Hall. The routines were straightforward enough; she tried to do her best for the clients, and genuinely wished them well; but it was sometimes hard to remain encouraging. People came to look for new loves, but often—or so it seemed to her—only really wanted to talk about the loves that they had lost. Recently, of course, business had been booming. Servicemen, returning from overseas, found wives and girlfriends transformed out of all recognition. They came into the bureau still looking stunned. Women complained about their ex-husbands. 'He wanted me to stay in all the time.' 'He told me he didn't care for my friends.' 'We went back to the hotel we spent our honeymoon in, but it wasn't the same.'

The water boiled. Helen made the tea at Viv's desk and took the cups into the lavatory; Viv was in there already, and had raised the window. At the back of their building there was a fire-escape: if they climbed out they could reach a rusting metal platform with a low rail. The platform shuddered as they moved about on it, the ladder heaving against its bolts; but the spot was a sun-trap, and they made straight for it whenever they had the chance. They

could hear the ring of the street-door and telephone from there; and, like hurdlers, had perfected a way of getting over the sill of the window with great speed and efficiency.

At this time of day the sun fell rather obliquely, but the bricks and metal it had been striking all morning still held its heat. The air was pearly with petrol fumes. From Oxford Street there came the steady grumble of traffic, and the *tap-tap* of workmen fixing roofs.

Viv and Helen sat down and carefully eased off their shoes, stretching out their legs—tucking in their skirts, in case the men from the wig-maker's should happen to come out and glance upwards—and working and turning their stockinged feet. Their stockings were darned at the toes and the heels. Their shoes were scuffed; everybody's were. Helen got out a packet of cigarettes and Viv said, 'It's my turn.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I'll owe you, then.'

They shared a match. Viv put back her head and sighed out smoke. Then she looked at her watch.

'God! There's ten minutes gone already. Why does time never go so quickly when we've got the clients in?'

'They must work on the clocks,' said Helen. 'Like magnets.'

'I think they must. Just as they suck away at the life of you and me—suck, suck, suck, like great big fleas . . . Honestly, if you'd told me, when I was sixteen, that I should end up working in a place like this—well, I don't know what I would have thought. It wasn't what I had in mind at all. I wanted to be a solicitor's secretary . . .'

The words dissolved into another yawn—as if Viv hadn't the energy, even, to be bitter. She patted at her mouth with one of her slim, pale, pretty ringless hands.

She was five or six years younger than Helen, who was thirty-two. Her features were dark, and still vivid with youth; her hair was a rich brownish-black. Right now it lay bunched behind her head against the warm brick wall, like a velvet cushion.