
Opening Extract from...

Infidelities

Written by Kirsty Gunn

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The start of it . . .

'The stories were always for me to do,' I said.

'What do you mean by that?'

Richard gave me a certain kind of look, a look that came from being up too late and drinking tequila with me at a glamorous bar, but also the kind of look that showed that he knew me very well.

'What do you mean by that?' he said again.

We'd been talking about my short stories, the collection I'd put together and the kinds of short stories I was interested in, though Richard said that they were the kind that would never sell. 'Nobody buys short stories anyway,' he'd said earlier. 'No one thinks there's enough going on.'

'I just mean,' I said, 'that it was always me behind the whole thing. The collection, the idea of those stories I'd written. It was always me, inside them, I was involved. Like the one I was just telling you about, with the woman and her husband, the one that's called "Infidelity" . . . That one. But all of the stories. All of them. I was never

going to pretend that they'd just, you know, arrived invisibly on the page. I was always there.'

'Phew,' said Richard. He drained his little tequila glass, and set it down. 'You're there, all right,' he said.

'And I'm also right here.'

'You're the writer, that's for sure,' Richard smiled, that long, slow smile I knew so well. 'You're the one, standing by, just like old James Joyce said.' He tapped his little glass. 'Loitering in some doorway, chewing on his fingernails or whatever—'

'Not chewing,' I said. I took a sip of my own tequila. A hundred per cent agave just like my friend Jennifer from Mexico said is the only kind you should ever have.

'Paring,' I said to Richard, taking another sip. 'Paring his fingernails. That's how Joyce described it, his definition of the artist – standing by – but, sure, you're right, he's there, she's there . . .'

Richard shook his head, he said 'Phew' again. I leaned over and gave him a quick kiss, not on the forehead or cheek, but on his mouth. He closed his eyes then. I closed mine. When I opened them he was looking at me.

Richard. Richard, Richard, Richard. Still himself, still the same man, after all this time, with that same wrecked and gorgeous look I'd been so taken with all those years ago. The same Richard. Drinking too much. Doing everything too much – but as though nothing would ever touch him. As though nothing would come close. He still wore

the same kinds of clothes he used to wear when we were together, had the same smell – of smoke and leather and some old fashioned cologne, like some fabulous old club from the eighties. Richard. Richard, Richard. Richard.

'That's the artist standing by, but coldly,' I said, I realised I was talking in a very low voice. I was practically whispering. 'Joyce uses that adverb specifically,' I said. 'So . . . I am not the same. I'm not like him. I'm not coming in on something and using it. I'm not discovering the story, and then writing it down. No. From the beginning, I was there. I'm not cold at all, you see. I'm in the midst.'

By now Richard had my hand in his hand. Very gently, he was stroking one of my fingers with his thumb.

'I should go home,' I said. 'It's late. All this talk of short stories, my collection . . . I should never have told you about any of it. Bringing you into it like this.'

'It's just made you want to go home,' Richard tapped my finger with his thumb. 'But you don't need to go home, not yet. Call your husband, call your children.'

'It's already too late to call them.'

'Well,' Richard said. 'Nevertheless. I want you to sit here, right here where you are. Look at us, in this lovely place . . .' He gestured with a nod of his head, at the restaurant around us, all the yellow lamps and the marble, all the silver buckets and the champagne and the oysters and the ice. 'I want us to stay right here,' he said. 'For now. Please. Don't go just yet.'

'Oh, You . . .' I said.

'No one reads short stories anyhow,' he said, for the second time that night. 'So you don't need to worry about that. We're safe. You and I. And all those things you've written . . . They're only here' – he touched the side of my head – 'and here', and he touched my heart. 'They're nowhere else.'

'They're in the book,' I said. '*Infidelities*. Remember? The whole collection's finished, it's done.' And I leaned over and I kissed him properly then, I kissed him on his lovely mouth.

'I'm glad we've gone out,' he said, after I'd finished. 'Let's stay out. Who knows. Maybe we'll never go home, you and I. Maybe we'll just say we're never coming home again.'

GOING OUT

A Story She Might Tell Herself

Bobby had got back late from the pub and said they'd all been talking about it. About this guy, the real thing, he said, from Tibet or someplace like that by the look of him, in the saffron coloured robes and with his little bowl and not speaking a word, just arriving in the midst of the village that day and taking up some kind of position, actually, was the way he'd described it, right there in the covered market under the clock.

And this was . . . What? Twenty years ago? More. Yet even now when all that time has passed and Helen can think about these things, look back upon episodes in her life and reflect upon them – *imagine her way into them,* sometimes, is how it feels – she considers how something did seem to begin for her then, that day, that night, in a way continues to begin. It was there in that phrase of Bobby's: 'Taking up some kind of position'. As though even he, in those words he used, had been aware somehow that the image of a monk from another world could come to sit squarely in the midst of their marriage, sit

between the two of them, make it clear how far they were apart.

Helen had just carried on filling the dishwasher while he spoke. Bobby always described anything that happened as though it was his own personal experience – what was happening in the world, in Iraq, say, or in Ireland – as though he'd just come from those places himself when everybody knew he just went to work at the agency and wrote the ads there like he'd always done, stopping each night at 'The Black Lion' for a 'quickie' after he got off the bus, before he came home. He was good at it, holding forth like that. She had put the last of the children's things, their little plates and bottles, into the dishwasher and closed the door, and just let him go on, claiming ownership of something that he hadn't been part of, expecting her not to know the difference. Now he was talking about Tibetan practice and what it was to be a monk in this day and age, what it might mean to have one arriving here in their little Oxfordshire village, settling himself down in the covered market, right in that same place, he said, where Helen had had her organic stand last summer when she'd been in the mood, remember, to do that sort of thing.

Helen sat down herself then. With Bobby at the kitchen table, the dishwasher running and the casserole up behind her on the hob . . . She said, 'Listen, I know.'

She'd always had to do that, to get his attention, would have to sit down and actually face him, speak into his face, have him see her with her mouth moving . . .

So she'd said, 'Listen, I know', sitting right there in front of him, and she remembers now the look on his face after she'd spoken, just for a second, maybe, but terrified, terrified.

Then he got up to get another beer from the fridge.

It came from his job, of course. That thing of being used to hearing your own voice, knowing you could convince people with the way you spoke as much as what you said. Ever since Helen had known Bobby he'd described himself that way, like he was proud of it, that Helen would have to turn from what she was doing, take the seat right there before him to intervene in the run of his own conversation. *Am I interesting you at all?* she used to often wonder to herself, in those early months when she was first going out with Bobby, realising that at parties, in certain bars and restaurants, if they were there with a crowd of people he simply wouldn't hear her, wouldn't see her, even. Much less fancy her, she knew, if she didn't put herself right there in his direct line of vision. *Not interesting enough, I guess . . .* she'd thought then, but they'd got together somehow even so, had fun, hadn't they, for a while? Then they'd got married and it was part of what they did together, Helen used to it by then, Bobby talking, her listening to him, moments exactly like that night in the kitchen – except this time she went on to say to him, 'I was there. I saw the monk myself.'

Bobby took a swig of his beer, shrugged, like he thought, 'So?' The bottle he'd just taken out from the fridge already looked near empty, though Helen could hardly remark

on that. She'd been sipping away on white wine herself, making sure the glass was always at least half full. Because that was part of their marriage, too, wasn't it? It was what Helen did while she made supper, waiting for Bobby to come home, sorting through the dishes, listening out that she hadn't left the TV on too loud so as to wake Winnie, or wake the boys.

But the fact is, she did know. All about the monk and his little bowl. She'd come from dropping Win at her morning playgroup like she did every morning, leaving the babies tucked up in their baskets in the house without her and with a feeling of anxiety about doing that so she'd be always in a rush to get back to them before they would wake and realise she was gone . . .

Except that she'd been stopped that morning, hurrying up the path by the church, by Elizabeth Ferry from the Rectory saying that this kind of miracle was taking place in the village square. This beautiful Tibetan monk was there, Elizabeth had said, he'd simply arrived amongst them, was sitting now under the clock and would Helen go and sit with him, just for a moment even? She might want to place a few coins in, as Elizabeth put it, 'this amazing earthenware bowl, misshapen, you know, like he's formed it himself out of clay.' She'd talked away, Helen all the time trying to get a word in so she could get back to the twins, but then Elizabeth had gone on to say that everyone in the village, *especially* churchgoers – she'd underlined that *especially* – should go and be with the monk, just for a minute or two,

John had told her, as a way of saying the church supported, no encouraged, other faiths, other prayerful routes to God.

She was like that, Elizabeth. John may have been the Rector in those days, but his wife was the one who 'went out', as she put it, among the parishioners and got to know them, encouraged their little spiritual acts. Helen wonders what she's doing now. The same sort of thing, probably, while John would be indoors like he'd always been, reading, praying. He was quite High, apparently, or had started off that way. Helen had been told that by a neighbour once. That John had been quite keen on that rigmarole with incense and the saints. But since she'd been going along to church, not that regularly but often enough to try to feel part of things, she could only see him as being more of a kind of Presbyterian, the sort she was used to, really, especially being married to someone like Elizabeth who was always talking about Islam and Buddhism and other religions. It was children, it occurs to Helen now, who he often talked about when he stood up in front of them on a Sunday. About children's imagination being a sort of faith in itself. What a lovely idea that is, she thinks now. Not at all the kind of thing you'd expect from someone who'd once been quite High. Or was it? Back then, Helen had supposed, that kind of talk was all about getting more people in the pews, but thinking about it now . . . Well, maybe John's interest in mystery and the imagination had always been just the same as loving incense and candles . . . Probably after all it was the same. Still, that morning it had felt strange. To have

Elizabeth stopping her the way she did and saying, pretty much, that it was John this time telling people what to do. *Especially churchgoers*, is what Elizabeth had said. No wonder they'd been full of it in the pub. Everyone must have been full of it – shy John speaking out, Elizabeth galvanising the whole village to act in a special sort of way.

Helen herself had looked at her watch and said 'okay' to her, 'I can do five minutes', aware of the eight-month-old babies sleeping at home and having an image of them, wrapped up like little packages in their baskets, sleeping for now, but who knows what could happen if they awoke. Still, she'd said 'okay'. She'd been 'Showing Willing' – that phrase of Bobby's they'd started using since they came here from London, since Winnie was born, and then the twins, and she'd found herself having to try to fit into village life. 'Showing Willing' meant that she would do what she had to do to be like the others, the other women in the village, be prepared to be, at least – that's what Bobby said. He was the one who'd come up with the phrase for her, as a way of getting past all that big-city snobbery about people who lived in English villages and he'd been delighted with it, the way the words maintained an upper hand while doing all that institutional friend-making that was necessary in these small conservative places that were an hour or two away from London and on the commuter circuit, maybe, but deep in the heart of the Home Counties even so. It was all about being 'dependable', learning to – how had Bobby put it? – 'act local'. As though, Helen thinks now, he knew anything about acting 'local' when he was as much a

Londoner as she was – but she'd ended up showing willing even so. Bobby stopping into 'The Black Lion' every night didn't count. Because showing willing had meant much much more than simply being with people, hadn't it? It had meant doing things that sometimes made her feel silly and shy but still she did them to show she was friendly, like that organic stall the year before all this happened, when she'd set up a trestle table and sold potatoes and salad vegetables and fruit. She'd been aware of herself then as willing indeed, the very picture of making an effort and being jolly as she chatted to her neighbours and counted out change. A glowing pregnant woman is how she'd wanted to see herself back in those days. Laying out before her the healthy and lovely foods, her little toddler playing beside. Showing willing in the covered market every Friday until she'd got too exhausted by the weight she was carrying, the exhausting feel of the twins growing bigger and bigger inside her, and she'd had to give the market up and stay, pretty much, alone and relieved at home.

Helen had known then – she sees this clearly now – that giving up the market was when she'd realised that deep down she'd never be dependable the way Bobby had planned. That she could show willing all she wanted but that didn't necessarily mean she could become one particular kind of person, the kind who didn't change, want other things. She sensed the other women in the village were like that though, cheerful and fixed in their habits. They didn't dart furtively in and out of church as though they didn't quite belong there; they stayed around and

drank instant coffee afterwards, they ran church committees and fairs. It was the same at the toddler group where she took Win, where she was surrounded by these women so comfortable in their role as 'Mum', with their gardens and their husbands and their quiet nights in front of the TV . . . But how could Helen have ever felt she was fixed in that safe and secure way when all the time she had a kind of panic, that rose up gradually in the day, got better in the evening when she poured her first glass of wine, but then came back in the morning, dark and lusty, to claim her.

She sees now that she was nothing but change in those days – one person here, meeting Elizabeth by the church hall, another there, getting Bobby into bed at night, making sure she herself had a huge glass of water by her bed for if she were to wake feeling dehydrated and sick. Of course she wasn't dependable, she knew it then like she knows it now. The only difference is it was covered up then, by the habit of Bobby, of looking after him and being with him. So the house had been tidy and the twins and Winnie well cared for and clean and no one would have ever known, would they, that beneath it all was this other life – rushing and uncertain and frightening, even – with a feeling in it that anything could happen, anything. It was why she'd married Bobby, wasn't it? To try to protect herself against that feeling? It was why she listened to him, let him go on and on. As though she might turn her life into a story told by someone else – one of his stories in fact – like a story might calm a person and quieten

them in the dark, fill the void with words and phrases and sentences that they might go to sleep.

Like that word: 'Dependable'. Back then, Helen thinks now, her mind had been full up with those kinds of words and thoughts: That they might make her into somebody who would 'show willing' and do the right thing. So of course she'd gone down to the covered market that day as she'd promised and sure enough there he was, the monk, right there by the clock just like Elizabeth had said. He was sitting in the lotus position wearing yellow robes and with the little bowl . . . *Taking up some kind of position.* Only this time it wasn't Bobby talking. It wasn't one of his stories. Because Helen had seen the monk. She'd seen him herself.

That moment comes in on her now, like then. For hadn't it seemed, at first, impossible to believe?

He'd been like a statue, sitting in that dainty way, his head bowed, the bare feet curved up neatly and tucked into each other in his lap and that smile on his face like you see in all the travel brochures to Tibet. Like the smile on the faces of the monks when there'd been the show of Tibetan art at the V&A and then the other one at the Met when she'd been living in New York that time, staying with an old friend of her mother's who was taking care of her, really, while Helen had been trying to straighten things out in her life, trying to decide whether or not she'd even marry Bobby, and they'd flown monks

in from a monastery somewhere in India to make those sand mandalas on the floor . . .

But how much of all that, though, came back to her the moment when she saw the monk – Helen can't be sure. In a way it's because thinking now about these details, of that day, and what followed . . . The whole act of remembering starts to bring up all kinds of other memories too. Yet, though she can't be sure if it felt that that part of her life came back to her so completely in that moment of seeing the monk, of remembering that time of living in New York . . . Well, all she can think is that it feels like that now. As though her whole life, somehow, came up and surrounded him. Who she'd been. What she'd done. Remembering the way she'd felt so free in New York but also so scared – realising that she was on the verge of deciding something that needed thought and care but rushing towards it as though with her eyes closed, rushing forward amidst all the clubs and the bars and the partying, running around New York and knowing Bobby was over in London, waiting, waiting . . .

Certainly what she was aware of at the time was the way that day, that morning, each detail around the monk – the dark stones and brickwork of the village building, the gilt detail around the face of the clock, the fresh blue china colour of the summer sky, early and fresh and really like polished china because there'd been rain last night – seemed to charge itself, Helen thinks now that's exactly it, the phrase, 'charge itself', each detail lending her its full and significant meaning. And set against these things,

these *things,* the *thingness,* if you like, of building stones and of sky, was the vivid colour of saffron robes, the little earthen bowl, pale straw of the sitting mat . . . These elements of the monk that seemed on another plane altogether, ethereal, even though they were right there in front of her, come out of a place way beyond herself, unknown to her entirely, of hope or faith or dream.

Something started for her then. She had the strong instinct which of course she immediately quelled to put her hands together to form her hands into a prayer position like the monk was doing, to extend herself towards him that way . . . But she hadn't done that, not anything crazed or needy. Instead, she'd managed, after all the initial feelings of belief and disbelief and of wonder, to be exactly as Elizabeth had suggested. She'd approached the monk, gently put a few coins and a crumpled note into the begging bowl at the corner of the mat, and said, slowly but in a very safe, English way, 'Welcome.'

The man looked into her eyes. He didn't speak.

That 'welcome' must have sounded strange yet Helen hadn't felt foolish about it, or even embarrassed – really it was as though she'd entered a kind of dream. Everything was quiet, set. There was a stillness in the air, around the monk, that Helen was part of – as though the stillness had entered her, was part of her. A feeling Helen recognises now in a way she couldn't then as calm. It was only when Margaret Cockburn from three doors down arrived, and came up to the monk and said 'Welcome' pretty much in the same way Helen had, that it was as if she remembered,

with a start, the twins back home on their own, and she rushed away, arriving at the house with her heart like a roaring engine as she tore up the stairs, three at a time. There were the boys though, just as she'd left them, quiet and placid and only starting to move when she leaned over them and startled them with her noisy, ragged breath. She stayed there some time, standing over them, watching them, listening to the small sucking noises they made as they opened and closed their mouths, getting ready for their next feed . . . But even as she did so by then all she was thinking about was the monk in the village and that moment of her standing before him and feeling everything was still, like a painting she could stay standing in front of and as long as she stood there would never feel panic again or terror or deep, deep despair.

All that day she'd thought of nothing else. Remembering that feeling. Trying to get it back. So though she couldn't really understand why she would need to look at the monk again, nevertheless she knew she'd have to – so she bundled the boys up into the pram and used picking up Winnie from playgroup as her excuse to go back to the village.

'There's an interesting spaceman come to visit us,' she'd said to her daughter, meeting her at the church hall door. 'Shall we go and see him, you and I?'

Winnie looked up at her, her hair tumbled from her morning's play and with that lovely heat coming off her, Helen always felt, like a feeling of her daughter's certainty, her little body so solid and fixed and sure of itself in the world.