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Written by Sarah Duguid

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LOOK AT ME

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Headline Publishing Group

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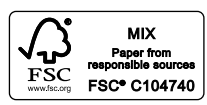
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ACT ONE

He told me that the ways of love and the ways of his loins weren't things that could be constrained by convention, that only the fearful lived like that.

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the letter

ON THE SIDE TABLE, FRAMED IN SILVER, MY FATHER DANCED. NOT A becoming kind of dance: his arms flailing, knees bent, one foot twisted in the air. He wore a multi-coloured top with wizard's sleeves and looked as if he could have done with a wash.

The photograph was taken back then – in his heyday – during the years he spent swanning about in silly clothes, smoking weed. I could imagine him, the man he used to be, slithering up to girls with talk on his lips of the new experimental ways with love. All wiry beard and long, greasy hair. Temptation itself.

I turned to look at him now, luminous with suntan, fresh back from the South of France, wearing his white trousers rolled up at the ankle. His teeth looked whiter when he had a tan. His dark hair had a decent cut and he wore a pressed linen shirt with an extra button undone into a deep 'V'. He sat on the grey sofa; behind him hung a picture of a nude, the lines of the body in electric blue etched into thick white paint. If I'd taken a photograph of him now, with his unsocked feet and smooth, dark hair, you'd take him for an Italian art dealer.

He pressed his bare ankle against the glass corner of the coffee table. It looked painful, the meeting of cold glass and

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bone. His foot dangled over the edge, his brown toes scrunching and unscrunching as he talked. He hadn't so much as flinched when I showed him the letter.

'Elizabeth, it could happen to anyone,' he said.

Dear Julian,

This letter may come as a surprise to you. I am writing to tell you that I believe you are my father. My name is Eunice. I was born in Charing Cross Hospital in the unmarried mothers' ward and adopted by a couple from St Albans.

'She's younger than me.'

'Oh, calm down, Elizabeth,' he replied. 'You're being way too hysterical and middle class about this.'

'You were married to Mum at the time.'

'Yes,' my father replied. 'But it was different back then.'

I remained still. He turned his head skywards, ran a hand through his hair and refused to be excited. The way he looked at me was nonchalant and carefree, all white linen and suntan. He told me that the ways of love and the ways of his loins weren't things that could be constrained by convention, that only the fearful lived like that. He was that hippy again, poking at 'people's narrow assumptions'. I wanted to ask him what was so wrong with basic decency, but I knew he'd have just snorted. I pointed at a paragraph further down the letter. 'She said you shouldn't feel guilty.' I raised my eyebrows at him. 'She's an optimist.'

'There's a bottle in my suitcase. Fetch it out for me, would you? I've had a long day. The flight back from Nice was hellish.'

* * *

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I found the letter the previous day when my father called from his holiday asking me to find a phone number for him. 'It's a beautiful day out here,' he said. 'I'm sitting on a sun lounger. I'm like a lizard on a hot stone watching some wonderful girls. They're leaping in and out of the water in tiny bikinis. If they start going topless I don't think I'll ever recover.'

I laughed.

'This phone number. It's scribbled on a receipt. It'll be in my office somewhere. Just go and search.'

My father had built his office in a shed pushed up against the old brick wall in the garden. From the outside it looked nice enough, painted green to blend in with the ferns and bamboos, but inside the place had something of the caravan about it. A laminate floor, a bare strip light, nasty lilac curtains hanging from a single plastic-covered wire. Little of my father expressed itself in there. His chair, perhaps. Designed by Eames, it was dark green leather and stood on chrome spokes. The lamp, another giveaway. In the evenings, he sometimes read in his office. The soft light of an Anglepoise lamp in stainless steel made the place feel cosier but, still, it smelled of pinewood and paint.

My father left the office key in the lock so he couldn't lose it. He only had a cheap computer, not worth stealing, a few notebooks, a telephone, nothing he couldn't live without. I turned the key, pushed open the shed door and went straight to his desk. I searched through the piles of paper on top but found nothing. Usually, he hid the tiny key for the desk drawer in his pocket or pushed under a corner of carpet but that day it, too, remained in the lock. He'd left in a hurry. The position of his chair said it all. It showed the trajectory of the journey he'd taken the previous Friday. Not tucked under the desk but

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rather flung back, almost at the back wall at an angle, pointing towards the exit. Five o'clock came; he pushed back while seated, stood up, strode out of the office without a backward thought. In his haste to leave for his holiday – a long weekend in the South of France, which he optimistically described as a working holiday because he'd be trying new grape varieties – he'd forgotten to lock the drawer. Next to a batch of receipts, an old cinema ticket and a blue stapler, sat Eunice's letter folded into a pink envelope. I opened it, curious at the pink, at the feminine handwriting, at a whiff of scent that still hung around the envelope's flap.

The words didn't connect. I had to read the letter two or three times. Did another man called Julian Knight exist, a chap who might have been the kind to receive something similar? After the third reading, I fell into the chair, like I'd been pushed; a spinning column of wind had come from nowhere and taken me off my feet.

Was it worse that she was female? Isn't being a sibling always an act of supremacy that's tempered if just two of you exist? What would my brother Ig and I do with a third; what would I do with another woman?

Back in the sitting room, I put it to my father: 'The postmark shows you've had it for over a year.' But the conversation went no further. I was small-minded. He was a heroic exploder of social mores. He cocked his leg. His tanned, bony foot buried itself in the sofa cushion. He plinked ice cubes into a glass of wine. 'Smell it,' he said. 'The vines are grown so close to the sea that salt dries on the grape skins. The scent of it takes you right back to the coast.' He held aloft the thin crystal glass, frosted with condensation, examining the colour in the light. He dunked his nose into it. He breathed in loudly, flaring his nostrils, a rush of air entering them.

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‘Strange you couldn’t wait for such a nice wine to chill,’ I said.

He dropped in another ice cube. ‘Thoroughly wonderful,’ he replied, taking a sip.

That evening, Ig made dinner. He didn’t usually cook. He opened all the cupboards, slid around the floorboards in socked feet, irritated that he couldn’t find anything. It’s a ruse, I thought, so he doesn’t have to face Dad. The day before, when I showed Ig the letter, he told me I had to keep it quiet. He became furious, threatened to tear up the letter, to burn it. I’d stuffed the thing down my top, running from him while he tried to throw me on to the sofa to grab it back.

Sitting opposite my father, I pinged one of the four metal lamps that hung equidistant over the long oak table. The shape of rice hats, in bright orange, they made a deep gong sound with each flick of my middle finger. The letter sat in the middle of us. It gaped at the fold, bobbing open and shut as the air stirred, like a clam shell gently nodding in the underwater swell. I carried on pinging the light, to make my father look over, but he ignored me, too busy explaining to Ig about his marvellous, salty wine.

Dinner ready, Ig slid the plates in front of us. At the head of the table, my father’s chair had a high back, an arch of chrome curving around his shoulders. He looked as if he sat on a throne. The king of his own little North London kingdom. Ig had overcooked the asparagus. It drooped from my father’s hand, a limp, sluggish green. He dangled it into his mouth to chomp the head off it. Still chewing the asparagus, he folded a pink slice of Parma ham on to his tongue.

‘I might get in touch with her,’ I said.

‘Just leave it, Elizabeth,’ my father replied.

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'Why?'

'It's in the past.'

'Have you met her?'

'Twice.'

'Did Mum know about her?'

'Of course she did,' he replied.

'Did she mind?'

'It was different back then,' he said.

My chair clattered to the ground. 'I'm going to write to her,' I said. Ig had a look of both fear and impatience about him. I heard him call me petulant as I rushed out of the kitchen to find the writing pad. I punched my words on to a sheet of it. I'd show him.

From the doorway, my father watched. 'Not on the Basildon Bond, Elizabeth,' he said. 'Your grandmother would be turning in her grave.'

'What would Mum be doing in hers?' I replied.

Dear Eunice,

I'm sorry to read in your letter to Julian that you haven't so far managed to find your mother, and glad to hear that we at least form half the puzzle. I hope that's some consolation. I noticed that you and he had exchanged a few letters and he told you about Ig and me. Perhaps you'd like to learn more? I would be interested in getting to know you. We're related, after all. We must have things in common. I've often thought I'd like a sister. Did you meet up with Julian? I hope he hasn't disappointed you. He can be so vague. He's like that with everyone. So if you feel he has let you down, please don't take it personally.

Anyway, please do write back to me.

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With very warmest wishes,
Your sister, Elizabeth

I scribbled the address then stalked off to the postbox before I could change my mind. Outside, the quiet of the street surprised me. I don't know what I'd been expecting, applause perhaps. The leaves on the trees shook in the breeze. The wide four-storey brick houses, withstanders of two world wars, just stood there. I rushed down the street like a madwoman but no one seemed to notice me. A woman walked beside a man who pushed a bicycle. The trees continued their rustling. The houses remained stoic. I almost felt relieved when I turned into the main street to find the thunder and rattle of the traffic outdoing me. I posted the letter.

Back at home, I sat at the table to finish my wine. I knew I looked defiant. Bolt upright, my elbows resting on the table, I turned my head away from Ig and my father. All they'd see was my profile as I stared out of the window, willing them to dare to speak. Neither of them did. I rippled with energy but the two of them remained still.

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