

Love All

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Extract

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PERCY

He looked at what he could see of her face – half turned away from him but unmistakably downcast – and tried another tack.

‘It isn’t that I don’t love you. It’s – all the other things.’

‘Them. They’ve always been there.’

‘Of course they have. But, unfortunately, they change.’

There was a short silence, after which she muttered reluctantly, ‘How do you mean – exactly?’

‘Don’t sulk, Percy. This isn’t easy for me, you know.’

She did look at him then, and he wished she hadn’t.

‘The children,’ he began, ‘are growing up. They’re beginning to notice I’m hardly ever at home. They need a stable, affectionate family life. They need both parents . . .’ He elaborated at length on this and felt better. Nobody, he thought, could have put the situation more clearly and responsibly.

‘So you’re not going on your location hunt. You’re going to stay at home and sail boats on the Round Pond and take them to the zoo – things like that?’

‘I have to go to Los Angeles. That was scheduled months ago. I told you. I just thought that as I was going away it would be better to tell you before I went. I could have just written, but I thought you’d rather be told face to face.’

‘I see.’

‘You do begin to, don’t you, Perce? You do realize it has nothing to do with what I feel for you?’

‘Yes. At last I do.’ She pushed away the coffee cup and folded

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her hands on the table. 'We fancied each other for a while and now you've changed your mind. That's all. It's not your fault. I was pretending as much as you were.'

His eyes, which had been fixed on her, flickered, but he said breezily, 'What on earth do you mean *pretending*?'

'That we loved each other.' She decided it would be safe now to light a cigarette without her hands trembling too noticeably.

'But, darling, you've missed the point completely. We do love each other. Well, I know I do. I was just trying to explain why one can't always have what one wants. However hard it may be—'

'I haven't missed the point. Love doesn't come into it. That's not too hard, is it?'

There was a pause, and then she added, 'I mean if you really loved somebody—'

He got up from the table.

'I'm sorry. I'm not up to your notions of love.' He said it in the tone men she had known employed when they told her how afraid they were that they hadn't got time for reading novels.

'Poor you.'

She watched his look of startled exasperation. Without the beard, she thought, he'd have a weak face. Unexpected pain rose in her gorge and she swallowed it. The thing to do was to get out. I can stand, she thought. She felt distinctly shaky.

He was holding out his hand to her. 'Darling. Don't let's spoil our last weekend together. We've got the whole of today – and tonight. Lynne is staying with her mother for Sunday lunch so we've got until about four tomorrow.'

His tone now was indulgent. He was offering her a special treat. She'd fallen for these spasmodic goodies for nearly two years now.

On her feet, but holding the table with one hand to be on the safe side, she looked at him directly as she said, 'I'm sorry.'

I'm not up to your notions of lust.' And then, to be fair, she added, 'Poor me.'

And that was it. She'd gone quickly to the bedroom, collected her things and left.

She'd walked through streets lined with dark red blocks of mansion flats to the 74 bus stop on Old Brompton Road and waited for a bus that boasted an appearance every twenty minutes, standing for what seemed like hours in the dank, still air. It was one of those colourless, windless days people pretended was the beginning of spring. The bus, when it came, was almost empty, and she went upstairs and found a seat at the front. Here, with warm tears sliding down her cold face, she went over the whole scene again.

It had been a shock. People cry from shock. But it wasn't really, because from the moment they'd met that afternoon – as usual at Earl's Court station – she'd sensed something was wrong. Usually when they met he'd give her a meaningful, casual kiss on the cheek and take her hand, leading her through the streets to the gloomy little ground-floor flat that was lent to him by a friend for these occasions. Today he'd been waiting for her. Usually she waited for him. And there was no kiss. Instead he presented her with a small bunch of pink and white striped tulips. She had started to thank him, but he was already striding ahead. They stopped at the pâtisserie for croissants and a packet of coffee – they always began their weekends with breakfast.

When they finally reached the flat, the first few minutes were spent switching on lamps – daylight penetrated enough to navigate the room without bumping into furniture, but no more – putting on the kettle, so encrusted with scale that it took an age to boil, making the bed with their linen kept in a cardboard box for the purpose, and lighting the gas fire in the sitting room. They usually breakfasted in the tiny kitchen that contained, besides minimal cooking equipment, a small, rickety table and

two chairs with tubular steel legs that were arranged at an angle almost designed to trip one up. She'd put the tulips in a large jar that had once been full of pickled onions. During all this they'd hardly spoken. She reflected now that she hadn't even missed their customary hug, when he would enfold her in his arms. She did ask how his week had been and he'd replied, 'Awful. Just utterly frustrating and awful.' He didn't ask about hers.

When the coffee was made and they were drinking it, she'd told him about giving in her notice.

'Why? Why did you do that?'

'I just got rather sick of it. It wasn't leading to anything.' Even then she'd not been honest.

'So what will you do? Get a job with another publisher?'

She'd taken the plunge. 'Well, I thought – yes, I expect I shall eventually – but I thought that perhaps I might take a holiday first.' And when he didn't react, she added, 'I thought perhaps I might go out to Los Angeles with you. I mean, nobody need know.'

And that was when he told her. He simply couldn't go on as they were. It was tearing him to pieces, sapping his energy, making Lynne unhappy, and was just the wrong thing to do. He was unable to concentrate on his work – was starting a new series, and as the ratings hadn't been great for the last lot he knew this was his last chance. And he hadn't written a word of his second novel for months now, and felt terribly guilty. Altogether, it was time to make a break.

There had been a silence during which she could neither speak nor look at him. Then, when he started all that awful rubbish about loving and went on to even worse stuff about 'stable, affectionate family life', it was as though he was ripping apart the cosy, candle-lit veil that had enshrouded them and exposing all the romance, the secrecy, the excitement to such a harsh light it seemed to her their entire affair dwindled, became

as pallid as a fire in full sunlight. He'd just wanted a bit on the side: love had never had anything to do with it. She tried to envisage a stable, affectionate family life, and failed. It was something that had never come her way.

But I went along with it – with all of it, she thought, as the small flurries of hatred for him changed course and she recognized herself as every whit as dishonest as he, full of craven pretence. She hadn't even wanted him very much. She'd wanted other things she'd thought could be exchanged for sex, and long after it was clear she wouldn't get them, she continued to play the part of the romantic second string, prepared to accept any crumbs of time and attention he could bestow. So, really, she had been just as much out for herself as he, but her hopes were far more unrealistic and high-flown. He'd simply wanted a jovial extra-marital affair, while she wanted – what? A great love? A romance of heroic proportions? So I picked up, or let myself be picked up by an overworked married man with two children and a wife with post-natal depression. I pretended he was a great writer because he wrote a novel I couldn't understand, though ever since I've known him he's done nothing but write the Inspector Starkey stuff for television.

But even as such acrid thoughts occurred, she remembered snatches of their earliest times together – their first dinner at Ciccio's in Church Street when she'd discovered how difficult it was to eat spaghetti if you never took your eyes off the other person's face. In the taxi afterwards, he'd asked if he might come home with her, but she'd said no, she lived with her aunt. And before he even said anything, she realized how stuffy it sounded.

'It must be rather restrictive,' he'd said eventually. 'I mean, aunts don't really go with the swinging sixties.'

He'd dropped her outside the house in Maida Vale, told the cab to wait and taken her arm. 'Adelaide Villa,' he read. It was painted in black on the glass fanlight. 'Is that your aunt's name?'

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‘No, she’s called Florence.’

‘Nearly as good. An aunt called Adelaide or Florence living in Maida Vale is pretty good, I must say.’

It was probably the first of what she now recognized as a number of crass notes he’d struck. ‘Maida was a battle.’ But he turned her chin, kissed her, caressed her cheek with two fingers, and made her incapable of thought.

‘I’ll ring you at your office,’ he’d said. ‘Sleep well, Persephone.’

But she hadn’t slept much that night. She’d locked the front door and crept quietly upstairs. Her aunt’s bedroom door – ajar, the light on – couldn’t be ignored.

‘Shall I come in and say good night to you?’

‘Why not?’

Floy was sitting up in bed wearing her navy roll-necked jersey – the room was freezing – and her scarlet mittens, the bed littered with seed catalogues, which she marked up. She was smoking as usual, a very small cigar. Marvell, her large black cat, lay stretched on his side across her legs. ‘Marvell was delighted you didn’t come home to dinner. He’s rather partial to haddock,’ she’d said after her cheek, as cold as an apple, had been kissed.

‘I hope you ate your share.’

‘Enough. Food is only a hobby with me; with Marvell it’s a profession.’ She patted the bed. ‘Sit down, dear one, and tell me.’

‘What?’

‘What did they say when you told them?’

‘Oh – that.’ For a second she’d been aware of a sharp glance over her aunt’s half-spectacles. She moved some catalogues to sit down. Marvell instantly got to his feet and plodded about over the papers. It took him a long time to find anywhere as comfortable as he had left.

‘They didn’t seem to mind much. But I wasn’t doing anything interesting. Anyone could do it.’

‘And so?’

‘I thought I’d try for a job in publishing.’

‘Good idea. But have a holiday first. Once you get a job you’ll have to work for months before you get another.’

‘Floy. A holiday at this time of year? I loathe snow and everywhere else would be too expensive.’

There had been a short silence, and then Floy, as she had known she would, said, ‘You could go and stay with your father.’

‘I could, I suppose.’ Then she’d remembered earlier times when she had, and said, ‘I couldn’t really. I know you don’t believe me, but he doesn’t want me around, honestly.’

‘He always says he does – when he writes to me, anyway.’

‘I know, but it doesn’t mean anything. He’s being dutiful. I’m just another duty. And I really hate diplomatic life. I don’t know which I hate most, the sitting-down parties or the standing-up ones. The only time I feel sorry for my mother is when I think of her putting up with all that.’

‘She didn’t put up with it for very long.’ Floy, who had never married, disapproved of others taking marriage lightly. Then, as though she’d felt she had been harsh, she’d said, ‘You could, of course, pay your mother a visit.’

‘I don’t even know where she is. The last I heard of her she rang me from the airport to say she’d met a wonderful man and was going to India to *help* him in his *work*.’ The emphasis denoted her bitter incredulity at such an idea. ‘She doesn’t care about me either. She’s too Greek about me not being a boy. But I’ll think about it,’ she’d finished untruthfully, as she got up from the bed and met Marvell’s implacable gaze.

‘Well,’ said Floy, having been kissed for the second time, ‘I want you to know I shall only relinquish you with a low growl to the absolutely right person.’

Tears had rushed to her eyes, and she’d left the room quickly.

She remembered now, as the bus trundled through a park,

that she'd lain awake for hours, wondering whether perhaps she had met the right man.

At their next meeting, she'd gathered he was married. He didn't actually say so, but the implication was there, and when she asked him outright, he gave the impression he'd told her already.

It seemed to her now that the whole relationship had been sustained by her wilful dreams: she wanted to belong to somebody, to be first for them, wanted somebody to admire and appreciate her – he'd certainly done that when they were in bed. His marriage and all it entailed should have warned her, but she'd translated it into a mythological – as it now seemed – love in which she was totally and selflessly immersed. The hundreds of hours of suppressed unhappiness and bleak uncertainty had exploded at his complacent remark about her notions of love. It was absolutely true: he wasn't up to it – never had been. She was crying again, and furious with herself for it. It wasn't simply that she'd been taken in but that she'd been determined to be taken in.

So now, she conceded, she was pretty well back where she'd started two years ago, having resigned from the publishers, just as she'd left the BBC. The only difference now was that she wasn't going to some party vaguely connected with work – like the party where she'd met Denis – she was going home to Maida Vale and her aunt. Floy would know, at once, that something was wrong, but she never asked questions. When she'd told Floy the previous evening she was going to quit her job, yet again, and might be going on a holiday for a bit, Floy had simply said, 'Good. You haven't had a decent holiday for years.'

Marble Arch. Time to change buses for the one that went up Edgware Road.

She'd left the house so early that morning the post hadn't arrived; a postcard and a letter were waiting for her. Marvell was sitting on them, but he rose to his feet at the sight of her and

jumped off the table with a heavy, papery thud that made the letter and card skid off the table. As she bent to pick them up, he head-butted and uttered high-pitched offended remarks that she knew were almost certainly about food. His saucer, placed just outside the little room to the right of the front door, was empty. Floy must be out.

‘You’ll have to wait.’

The postcard was from a girl in the office who had recently married, and was honeymooning in Saint-Tropez. The letter was from her father.

As she wandered through the hall into the sitting room, the Morris willow-pattern paper gave way to the grander honeysuckle one – grander, but not cleaner. Floy had put up the wall-papers years ago when she bought the house before the Second World War and they had become foggy with dirt – except one small noticeably cleaner square to the right of the fireplace where she had rubbed the paper clean with bread. The experiment had been unexpectedly successful but, with rationing, she refused to continue as she said people, or even birds, needed the bread more and to use it on the wall was rather Marie Antoinette-ish. The rest of the room was much of a piece, in a state of gentle decay, curtains faded where the sun had caught them and the upholstery worn and heavily scarred by a succession of cats. The lampshades were of parchment darkened by the smoke of cigars and hand-stitched at the edges with what looked like bootlaces. There was a beautiful, slightly foxed landscape mirror over the fireplace and pictures on the walls, mostly bought by Floy’s grandparents, with the exception of an enchanting Gwen John drawing of a cat cleaning itself, and an incandescent Italian landscape by Edward Lear, both of which Floy had acquired. The carpets were hazardous, with huge rents ineffectively cobbled together at intervals. The room was far too cold to settle in without a fire, and she opened the door that led into the conservatory.

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This large octagonal room had been the reason Floy bought the house, and over the years she'd had it double-glazed and installed a large factory gas-heater, which made it the warmest place in the house. The air was kept damp by a humidifier, and the warm chlorophyllic air, when she went in, was both exotic and comforting. Floy had also acquired a black-and-white marble floor: 'Happened to be passing over Primrose Hill when they were demolishing some nice old houses to make room for some dwarfish monstrosities for very rich and, I imagine, very small people to live in. The builders said I could have the marble if I removed it pronto. It took seventy-two trips in the Austin but, my word, it was worth it.'

She'd then found – come upon – two ex art students who were interested in laying a marble floor. 'Why?' she'd asked; it didn't seem to have much to do with art. 'Never done it before,' they'd replied. 'I thought that was such a good reason, I let them get on with it. Beautifully laid to a fall so that all the water drains away. It cost me sixty pounds and a packet of cigars for the whole job.' Floy loved telling people about her floor. There were zinc trays on stilts all around that enabled her to tend seedlings at waist height. Percy couldn't remember a time when Floy hadn't been acutely rheumatic. The trays were filled with peat or gravel into which pots and seed boxes were plunged. An unusually large old *stephanotis* meandered up the wall, which was painted white, its waxy flowers adding their scent to the green air. She sat down in one of the two basket chairs beside the small round iron table to read her post.

Then I'll get out of my mistress clothes and make some coffee. I might even have another bath, she thought. The clothes were simply not wearable at home. Thin black stockings, no vest – far too unromantic – a tight black skirt that showed her knees, fortunately elegant, like her mother's, and a tight but thin scarlet polo-neck sweater that Denis had bought for her. Her feet hurt. He liked high heels but she didn't have the pointed Gothic toes

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required. She kicked off the shoes. It's amazing what we put up with, she thought, all the clothes we're expected to wear, from school uniforms to bridesmaids' dresses. A mistress's outfit was just another. She thought of Jackie in her bright white satin and garland of improbable rosebuds over her veil, and turned over the glossy postcard, all turquoise and green and glaring sand. There were nine exclamation marks in the short message, which suggested Jackie was having a super time and had a sense of humour about the drawbacks. 'Stephen's sunburned! And an insect bite in an awkward place!'

Percy felt she'd leapfrogged from bridesmaid to mistress without a second glance at the altar. But her next move seemed utterly uncertain. It was her fault. She could have stayed with the publishers, copy-editing, graduating in time to actually being an editor. But it had been a lonely job, not much better than typing at the BBC. Worse than doing something boring was not knowing what else to do. She recognized then that, without even giving internal voice to it, she had secretly set her heart on the clandestine trip to Los Angeles with Denis. She hadn't stopped for a minute to think whether he'd agree to it. She'd just assumed that if she made herself free, and paid for herself, he'd be delighted to take her along. It was only going to be three weeks, but it had seemed like a turning point beyond which there had been no need to look. Now here she was on the brink of everlasting uncertainty – people of twenty-three were known for lasting nearly three times as long.

It was appalling to have got this far and discovered no special gift or vocation, no serious love. She was drifting, which she remembered her father saying her mother had always done. Was it Greek to drift? Would she end up like her mother after the war – a kind of emotional gypsy travelling from one man to another, one country to another? Very unlikely, she thought. I don't have the looks for it. All she'd inherited from her mother was pale olive skin and black hair. The lustrous velvet eyes, the

rich mouth, the figure that, over the years, could only be described as voluptuous, the riveting profile she remembered being transfixed by as she once sat beside her mother in an aeroplane, all this had passed her by. Instead, she'd inherited her father's long, narrow nose, his wide mouth with lips that had never seemed a pair, the upper one thin, turned up at the corners, resting on a slightly fuller, less shapely, cushion. She knew all this because, in her painting phase, she'd tried to make portraits of him, mostly from photographs. She remembered describing his eyes – when she was struggling with them – as lying-down diamonds. Like hers, they were a pale grey-green, and had a wary expression, as though at any moment they might see something unexpected. The pictures she'd tried to make of him had been as much an exploration of the idea of a father as it had been about wanting to paint. It hadn't lasted long.

The one thing her parents had in common was their lack of enthusiasm, expressed in different ways, about being parents. Her childhood, spent everywhere but never anywhere for long, had shown her this, slowly, painfully, but ultimately with great clarity. They had surges of guilt, of course, when they moved her to a school nearer to wherever one of them looked like staying for a time; quite early on, she had boarded, which, she thought, made their whereabouts irrelevant since visits from either were rare. So, after the disastrous term at the Anglo-American School in Athens, living with her grandparents in their claustrophobic little flat, she'd been sent to England, when she was nearly twelve, to 'a school called Cheltenham in a part of England called Gloucestershire'. That's what she told the air hostess who had been deputed to look after her on the plane. Her aunt was meeting her, she'd answered when asked, and the hostess, who had yellow hair and blue eyelids, had said that would be nice, wouldn't it?, and she'd replied that she didn't know. But she did. Nothing was nice. She was always in the way or, like now, being put out of it. No doubt she'd shortly be

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in her aunt's way, and that would continue until she was old enough to fend for herself.

It hadn't turned out like that at all. She had come through Customs – nothing to declare, of course – and a small woman, who looked like a pirate and wore dungarees, gum-boots and a red woolly hat, had stepped towards her. 'Persephone, isn't it?' she'd said. She pronounced her name in a funny way. 'Persephone,' she'd answered. It was a Greek name. Her grandparents, of course, said it correctly. Her father called her Percy, and her mother Treasure.

'Well, I'm your aunt Florence, but you may call me Floy.'

She sat beside her aunt in her dirty little van, the back of which contained sacks full of something mysterious and three trees. She was silent, listless and wary. Though there was nothing to look forward to, there was always the chance of things getting worse.

'Are you taking me straight to school?' she'd asked, after a while.

'Certainly not. We're going to my house. You don't have to go to school for a week. That's good, isn't it?'

'I expect it is.' She made an effort. 'Why do you have trees in the back of your car?'

'I'm a gardener. But I shan't be working much this week because I want to make the most of you – *Persephone*.'

'*Ef karistó,*' she'd answered automatically. Her grandmother had always impressed upon her the need to be grateful and polite.

'How is your father?'

'He's in Caracas.'

'And your mother?'

'I don't know. She wasn't in Athens. I was with my Dimitriou grandparents. My grandmother has something wrong with her heart, so I couldn't stay.'

'Oh dear. Is it sad to leave Athens?'

‘Not particularly,’ she had answered stiffly. Either everything or nothing was sad. It was difficult to explain to a stranger.

‘Well, I’m glad you’ve come to me.’

‘Just for a week.’

‘Well, the holidays too, I hope. At least, whenever your parents can’t have you.’

She hadn’t replied to this. This aunt obviously subscribed to the notion that her parents wanted her, which was only a small step away from wanting to be rid of her.

When, eventually, they’d arrived at the house, which was set back off a wide road down which lorries and buses and much other traffic thundered, she read – as Denis had that first night he brought her home – that the low double-fronted house was called Adelaide Villa. It looked very large, which it was, compared to her grandparents’ flat, and she wondered briefly whether, like her father’s various houses, it would be full of secretaries and servants, though nobody came out to greet them and carry her suitcase, which she had now humped up the steps to the front door.

‘Darling. Let me take your case. Is it very heavy?’

‘Not particularly.’ She flinched at the endearment, but the case wasn’t heavy. She was, by now, used to leaving things behind, usually with little choice of what they were. Grown-ups’ view of what was necessary to pack never coincided with hers, and the consequences had often been hard. She no longer argued, insisting only upon three possessions: a much-battered sheep with boot-button eyes, a leather writing case that zipped up and had her initial on it, and her set of Jane Austen, six volumes in red leather, embossed with gold, that she had been given, she now remembered, two years earlier by this same aunt. Before Austen, it had been *The Secret Garden*, *The Brown Fairy Book* and *Black Beauty*. But after these necessities, she allowed whoever was currently in charge of her to pack what they pleased.

Her aunt unlocked the door and they stood in the hall, which had a lot of doors and a staircase on the right-hand side. A large marmalade cat sat on the hall table beside a bowl of cyclamen. He rose politely to his feet when he saw them.

‘Do you like cats?’

‘I do, quite. Shall I take my case up to the spare room?’

‘We’ll go up together.’

It was a small room, looking on to the roof of a large glass greenhouse and thence to the back garden. It had wallpaper with wild roses on it and a dark red carpet.

‘This isn’t the spare room. It’s your room. The spare room is for guests. You are family.’

This had confused her. Her aunt sounded kind and she feared kindness. When she gets sick of me it’ll be another story. She didn’t want to have something to lose. She’s just saying that because people say these things without meaning them. Anyway, she was being packed off to boarding-school in a week, so what was the point of a room of her own?

‘I usually stay in spare rooms,’ she said, and turned to stare out of the window.

But even during that first week, she realized that Floy, as she learned to call her, was different from other people. The discovery had been both exciting and painful. It was as though, she thought now, her fingers were frozen and somebody had held them up to the fire of Floy’s attention, and while they ached, she couldn’t resist being scorched by it. She also tested it on the mornings they spent buying the horrible school uniform and the evenings sewing on the nametapes Floy had thoughtfully ordered. To begin with she’d felt passively unconcerned about what she had to wear, but as she noticed Floy was anxious that she should, as far as possible, have what she wanted, her attitude became offensively indifferent. She shrugged and sulked and didn’t answer when Floy asked her if something was comfortable or fitted. Later, during a silent cab ride back to Adelaide Villa,

Floy said that perhaps they should have one more sortie ‘to buy you something pretty that has nothing to do with school’.

‘There’s no point—’ she’d begun, and found she was crying.

Floy gave her a handkerchief and talked about how frightening it must be going off to a new school and how she understood homesickness. Percy stopped crying at once to stare at her aunt. ‘Homesickness? How can I possibly have that? Why on earth do you think I would?’

‘I just thought you might. Never mind.’ And the rest of the journey passed in silence.

Back at the house, she had stomped upstairs to her room without a word. ‘Tea will be ready in ten minutes,’ Floy called after her.

She decided to stay in her room and wait for Floy to come and fetch her. When she finally – through hunger – descended, tea had disappeared. Floy wasn’t in the kitchen or in the sitting room. She found her in the conservatory watering her plants.

‘You didn’t tell me tea was over.’

‘I told you when it would be. I thought you didn’t want any.’

‘I do.’

‘Oh dear. Well, supper will be in an hour or two.’ And her aunt turned back to the plants.

It had felt as though it was all getting away from her again, as though she was losing Floy’s attention and care, which, she grasped vaguely, were important to her. Floy asked her, quite calmly, to move, so she could refill her can. ‘Anyway, I’ll be gone in seventy-two hours,’ Percy blurted out. There was a silence. As a last throw, she said, ‘I am homesick. I mean, I will be – at school.’

It wasn’t true, but it worked. Floy put down the watering-can and hugged her. It was the hug that made her cry, not homesickness, but how could Floy have known that? She clung to her aunt and cried.

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Much later, when they had had dinner, and played three games of bezique – a card game Floy had taught her – and had looked in the evening papers for a film she might like to see before she left, and after she had gone upstairs and had her bath and Floy had come to say good night to her in bed and she was finally alone, she had understood at last that she would be homesick after all. She didn't want to leave Floy or this house or this room – which had already begun to feel like *her* room – and go to yet another new place.

At the end of the week Floy had taken her to Paddington station and seen her on to the school train. Terror at the prospect before her and fear that she would break down in front of a crowd of strangers had reduced her to Arctic silence. Floy, having found the mistress responsible for the journey, and having introduced her as 'Persephone Plover, my niece', gave her a quick kiss, saying, 'I think it's probably better if I go now. Unless you want me to stay?'

She said she didn't mind and managed not to look at Floy while saying it. Her aunt turned away and walked back down the platform; she'd watched until Floy was through the barrier and had merged into the crowds beyond it. Behind her the mistress, Miss Burton, said, 'Persephone, this is Joanna Harcourt. She's another new girl,' and she turned to see a small girl with fair hair, freckles so thick they were like pollen and eyes red-rimmed from recent crying. When they boarded the train, Miss Burton told them to sit together, and throughout the journey she'd listened to Joanna's account of what she had left behind: her pony, her brothers, her cat and the wonderful dolls' house her father had actually made her.

She didn't stay at the school for long – stuck it for five weeks – and had then run away. That, when she looked back on it now, seemed ridiculously difficult. The school was at least five miles from the station. She remembered telling Floy she had planned her escape carefully. In fact, she had merely chosen a

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Sunday afternoon when fewer staff were around, during the free time between lunch and supper. She had already kept back half of the money Floy had given her and just slipped out after lunch, walked down beside the long drive so nobody saw her and into Cheltenham, then asked her way to the station. At Paddington, she showed a taxi driver all the money she had left – a little over three shillings – and asked if he would take her to Maida Vale. Luckily Floy was there.

She had stormed past Floy, once more, into the hall, and said, 'I've come back. I hate it so much there. I hope you won't mind,' and burst into tears, an uncontrollable flood.

Remembering it now made her cry once more and she laid her head on her arms and abandoned herself so completely she didn't hear Floy come in.

'Zephie darling. Zephie.'

So she told Floy about Denis.

'And now you have no job, no lover and no holiday. My poor Zephie, it all sounds most disappointing.'

She wanted to say it was far more than that, but really it wasn't – disappointing perfectly described it – or, rather, what it had turned out to be. She started to apologize for being so secretive, but Floy would have none of it. 'Nonsense. You're grown-up now. You have a perfect right to a private life. I'm only sorry it wasn't a nicer one.'

Later in the day she said, 'I've been thinking. I have rather a big piece of work in the West Country, and I could do with some help. Would you like to come and assist me for a week or two? A change is always good and it would give you some time to work out what you want to do.'

She thought she would. 'Where is it?'

'A house near a small town called Melton. A house with a very large garden, apparently, that is in a marked state of desuetude. My client wants advice and probably some drawings. You'll find yourself at the other end of a tape measure, and

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caring for Marvell. We're to stay in the house, so we don't have to struggle with hotels that don't understand travelling cats. And it's beautiful country – time you saw a bit more of that.'

She said, 'Yes, it is. I'd love to come.' She reflected gratefully that it was really the bracing affection of Floy, plus the incessant demands of Marvell for food and attention, that would take her mind off anything else.