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Strangers

Anita Brookner

Sturgis had always known that it was his destiny to die among strangers. The childhood he remembered so dolefully had been darkened by fears which maturity had done nothing to alleviate. Now, in old age, his task was to arrange matters in as seemly a manner as possible in order to spare the feelings of those strangers whose pleasant faces he encountered every morning – in the supermarket, on the bus – and whom, even now, he was anxious not to offend.

He lived alone, in a flat which had once represented the pinnacle of attainment but which now depressed him beyond measure. Hence the urge to get out into the street, among those strangers who were in a way his familiars, but not, but never, his intimates. He exchanged pleasantries with these people, but had learned, painfully, never to stray outside certain limits. The weather was a safe topic: he listened carefully to weather forecasts in order to prepare himself for a greeting of sorts should the occasion arise, while recognizing the absurd anxiety that lay behind such preparations, and perhaps aware that his very assiduity counted against him, arousing irritation, even suspicion. But codes of conduct that had applied in his youth were now obsolete. Politeness was misconstrued these days, but in any event he had never learnt

to accommodate indifference. Indifference if anything made him more gallant, more courteous, and the offence was thus compounded. And these were the people he relied upon to see him out of this world! Exasperation might save him, though that too must be discreetly veiled, indulged only in private. Hence the problem of finding fault with those whose job it would be to dispose of him.

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He had read somewhere that Stendhal, his one-time favourite writer, had collapsed in the street, been taken to a cousin's house, and had died. That was the way to go, the relative, whether liked or disliked, put in charge. And the point being, not that the relative was held in fond esteem, or otherwise, but that he lived two minutes away from the accident. Thus had chance favoured the great writer who had surely never seen himself as an invalid, had in fact survived the retreat from Moscow. It was therefore essential to possess not only a relative but a relative who would prove to be near at hand. Sturgis had a relative, a cousin by marriage, but she (not a capable he) lived in north London, whereas he was in South Kensington, as distant as it was possible to be. He had even considered moving, particularly on days when the smiles faded from faces after his all too valiant greeting. Surely north London would be more festive, under the Jewish influence? His relative had on several occasions impressed him with stories of how well she was regarded in the neighbourhood, how obliging her acquaintances were, how respected she seemed to be. These attentions had made her not grateful but, rather, imperious, as if the favour were hers. What confidence, he marvelled. He visited her for the entertainment value: his

presence, on such occasions of display, seemed to be acceptable, although he suspected she disliked him, as being not quite a man, too given to flattery. His defence against this was his perception that she might be lonely, her local eminence a fiction behind which she took shelter, and himself a useful idiot whose job it was to subscribe to the myth. Exasperation was also present on these occasions, but he was careful to control this until he was safely on his way home. The indifferent

faces of his fellow passengers on the bus consoled him, since these were in a way familiar. His lot was ineluctably cast among them, though he trembled at the prospect, for the habit of trust had been lost many years ago, and had in any case been fugitive.

Trust also meant faith, but this he had never possessed. Throughout the obedient years of childhood he had privately observed that God was unjust, or, even worse than that, He was indifferent. To the pronouncement, I am that I am, went the unspoken addendum, Deal with it. Boasting to Job of His omnipotence, His superiority to Job's peaceable sinless life, He offered no justification for any of this, merely issued a report. And Job had acceded, perhaps because it is preferable to be inside than outside, silently making his accommodation with the idea of injustice, of disproportion. And had been rewarded for his docility with the restoration of his fortune, as if he had agreed to let bygones be bygones. Perhaps he, Sturgis, might have been so tempted, had there been any sort of manifestation. That there never had been any such thing brought a certain comfort, but also an anxiety: was he not worthy? That was the feeling that had lasted, the true legacy of any attempt at a spiritual dimension to his existence. Thus he was truly bereft.

This Sunday, like all Sundays, was far too long. It was the prospect of the endless fading afternoon that had prompted the telephone call to Helena, his relative, the widow of a cousin on whom he had been on affectionate terms. He had felt sorry for her, knowing how difficult it is to live alone, thinking that women felt this more than

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men. He would have behaved towards her with all his customary, and customarily thwarted affection, had she not made it clear that his role was to be an inferior one, as a recipient rather than as an equal. So he usually resigned himself to a cool-headed appraisal of her folly (and of his), would listen to her accounts of her many friends, among whom was one she referred to as 'my tame professor', and whose function in her life was unclear; there were also her partners at the bridge club – 'the girls' – and the neighbours who invited her to dinner ('They make such a fuss of me I don't like to let them down'). There was no need to reply to any of this, nor was there much possibility of doing so. He supposed that she received some reassurance from this recital. As for himself, it may have been something of a relief to spend time in her comfortable flat, to be served a cup of tea rather than to make one for himself, and even to note that this performance never varied. Yet he could see from her restless hands that she was as little at ease on these Sundays (and no doubt on other days) as he was, and that his visits served some sort of purpose. That, he supposed, was why they continued, were in fact seen as inevitable by both parties. They had respect for ancient contractual arrangements, if for nothing else.

And then he perceived the innocence behind such self-regard, the same innocence that fatally coloured his own character, his longing for reciprocity. He perceived it in Helena's boast of her own desirability, even more in her absolute refusal to give weight to his own life and habits. His presence in her flat was her only sight of him, her only knowledge of him: beyond these apparitions he was assumed to dematerialize. He knew that any attempt to discuss matters of general interest would be thwarted; even his health was a taboo subject, since her own would naturally take priority. He could see that behind her greeting, which was genuine, was the wish that he would not stay long. He also knew that when he was safely on the threshold, his scarf wound round his neck, she would bestow the same lavish smile, clasp his hand firmly, kiss his cheek, and urge him to let her have news of him. Yet when the door closed and he could hear keys being inserted into locks he sensed gratitude for his departure.

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