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Opening Extract from...

At Mrs Lippincote's

Written by Elizabeth Taylor

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AT MRS LIPPINCOTE'S

Elizabeth Taylor

With an Introduction by
Valerie Martin



virago

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CHAPTER 1

"DID THE OLD MAN die here? What do you think?" Julia asked, as her husband began to come upstairs.

"Old man? What old man?"

She stood on the shadowy landing with its six white doors.

"What old man?" asked Roddy once more, coming up and putting his arm along her shoulders.

"The husband. Mr Lippincote. Oh, how I wish we needn't live in other people's houses!"

"What if he did?"

Yes, what indeed? The dead cannot communicate with the living, or do harm to them. Julia believed that: there are, of course, those who do not. She knew his death could make no difference to her, even if it had happened in that room, upon that bed. Heart trouble (angina pectoris, which people die from so often in novels) had been the end of him, not some loathsome disease. The heart gave its last tick, the blood having slowed, the limbs stiffened. Bodies are hastened away before further changes occur. 'A place for everything,' she thought, and giggled. But, nevertheless, hung back till Roddy had preceded her into the bedroom.

"Anyhow," he said, seeing her poor face, "people mostly die in nursing homes these days." That was Roddy all over—that leader of men, who did not know how the world lived, discounting all those who do not go to nursing homes, and Mrs Lippincote herself who believed in dying, if possible, upon the bed where one was born, and who had herself closed (without horror, only grief) the eyes of her dead husband in this very room a month or two before.

The room itself was filled with mahogany—wardrobe, chest, tall-boy, medicine cupboard—with a bluish sheen on

it this damp evening. The window was in one corner and was semi-circular, for it formed, as one saw from the outside, a little turret with a gilt weather-vane upon it. Green leaves —of some not very interesting tree, perhaps a sycamore— pressed up close to the panes. But there was every comfort. Julia switched on the electric fire and changed the room completely; the mahogany shone with pink now, and the trees outside were at once discounted.

There were all the trunks, one with the lid off and frothing chaotically with her underclothes, for she had dived to the bottom in search of handkerchiefs. Oh, God! Of course, they were not there. She found, however, some talcum powder and a packet of envelopes which she needed.

As for a handkerchief . . . sniffing miserably, she had begun to rummage in the pockets of Roddy's greatcoat. She did this aloofly, for husbands' pockets, since they were the subject of music-hall jokes, were always to be scorned and avoided. He did not, apparently, carry handkerchiefs. "Now, what are you up to?" he had asked, coming into the bedroom with yet another case. "My dear Julia, this trunk! You dive like a mole and leave disorder in your train."

He considered a list in his hand. "Handkerchiefs, stockings, small blue suitcase," he read out.

There was the blue suitcase on the chest, and here were the keys in his pocket. He clicked open the catches and handed her a nice white handkerchief. What could have been simpler?

But she had already, in desperation, blown her nose upon a piece of tissue-paper from her hat-box. Now, she sat by the fire and considered this incident. Roddy and Eleanor, who unpacked alone in the next room, were alike in this: they never dived frantically but considered lists which they had drawn up before. 'They have patience and method,'

she decided, 'but they are always too late. I, with my make-shift, have always arrived before them.'

"There are some things you cannot acquire," she told Roddy. "These lists, for instance. They are not in me. It is a flair. Like making pastry. You are either born with a cool quick hand or you are not. It can never be taught."

Such reflections were always thrown away upon Roddy. "I have never complained about your pastry," he assured her and then, remembering some book or other, written by a woman, on *Happy Marriages, How to Make, Maintain, and Endure Them*, he basely and unnecessarily betrayed his own mother. "Her pastry is always heavier than yours," he concluded.

'Those tarts!' she thought. The greyish slabs embedded with mauve cherries. But he shouldn't have said it. 'I wouldn't like Oliver to, one day.' Her legs, scorching before the fire, resembled blood-red mottled marble.

"I can't do any more!" she said. "Do let's leave it. Can't we unpack the rest to-morrow?"

"I'm on duty to-morrow night, and I must unpack my own."

"Oh, well then!" She pulled on some grubby quilted slippers. "I'll go and get the supper."

She peeped round the door of Oliver's room as she crossed the landing. He lay as still as a rock, yet as soon as she withdrew, sprang up in bed and called her. She went back only too gladly, bent to kiss him, laying her cheek against his own smooth thin one, breathing the warm cleanness of him. His arms twisted like snakes about her neck.

"I've forgotten what the outside of the house is like. Except the tower. I never went into a tower before." He was busily, under cover of the conversation, collecting hair-pins from the top of her head. Down came her hair, flopping heavily, frond after frond, against his face. He laughed but

still held on. "When you get inside the tower, though, it is just like an ordinary room." She could feel his heart racing beneath his ribs.

"Darling, I must go. I want my supper."

"Yes, so do I want mine."

"Hush! I shouldn't have come in. You're being stupid and naughty."

"Why shouldn't I have supper? I am *growing*," he cried, loosening his hold of her in his anger. "I need food."

When she got to the door, "Good-night, devil!" he called cheerfully.

"What was that I heard you call your mother?" Roddy stood gravely in the doorway.

"Shush!" Julia laid a hand on his sleeve and drew him back on to the landing. When Roddy said 'Your mother' in that way, she felt ridiculous.

"I won't have so much rudeness," he said loudly as she shut the door.

"Only fun," she whispered. "Let him go to sleep."

"You woke him up."

She went downstairs, groping through shadow, not knowing where the light switches were, her hands passing over the walls, which felt clammy and unfamiliar. The house had a closed smell. A little light came through some blood-red glass at the front door. Through an archway hung with plush, she came to the kitchen. It was like the baser side of someone's nature. Beyond the plush curtains, the house put aside all show of decency. Here, there was no doubt about the suggestion of damp. Beads of moisture lay upon the walls. She rattled curtains across the window and put on the light.

This room, she supposed, represented what was fitting and decent for the working class. On this side of the arch, varnished deal was preferred, wallpaper of brown and pink

flowers, a brown tablecloth reaching to the floor and a plant with thick grey velvety leaves. Then down a hollowed stone step into a brick scullery where a refrigerator whirred and water dropped bleakly and with regularity into a bowl. She opened a cupboard and was frightened by a soup tureen the size of a baby's bath. In another cupboard a dozen meat dishes of very slightly varying sizes, white with a wreath of inky flowers, the glaze traced with faint sepia cracks.

'That is how Mrs Lippincote set up house,' she told herself.

The gas-stove was rusty, but she unhooked a great iron frying-pan, wiped it out, stabbed at some sausages with a fork and laid them in a row in the pan. The ghosts of servants seemed to hover in the place—Mrs Beeton servants, with high caps and flying bows to their aprons. But the ghosts haunted; they did not help or encourage.

She went listlessly into the dining-room, up and down steps and through the arch into the other world: carpets, instead of linoleum; mahogany, not deal.

Roddy's cousin, Eleanor, had come down, had drawn the curtains and put on the gas-fire. The room looked bright and pleasant in its old-fashioned way.

Eleanor, with a newspaper spread on a chair, had climbed up to examine a wedding group.

"Oh, Julia! These clothes. The tucks and the scrolls of braid and all the little buttons on the bosoms!"

"And the bosoms themselves," said Julia. "Let me!" she begged. She took her place on the chair and gazed at the yellowing photograph. "Mrs Lippincote!" she murmured. "That's the old man, then! He looks as if he were made of wax."

Indeed, he looked full of apologies as if at the thought of the indiscretions lying ahead of him; but his bride, hand-

ling her bouquet masterfully, had already, it appeared, begun her business of smilingly controlling him.

"I never like seeing a bride so large," said Eleanor with a titter.

Julia gazed as if lost. There they stood, young, surrounded by prosperous-looking parents, all pleased, sure and comfortable. Yet did not one set of parents look milder, on a smaller scale than the other? Had she, in fact, married a little beneath her?

"Girls all had the same shaped faces in those days," Eleanor was saying. "Rounded, rather thick in the jaw, a lot of eyebrow and a fuzz of hair."

Yes, all the bridesmaids were alike, but were perhaps sisters. A strip of patterned carpet and some pots of ferns had been arranged outside a conservatory. The sun had shone. Two young men lay, leaning each on an elbow, at the feet of the others. With their ankles crossed, they looked like two splendid fishes lying there.

'And now it's all finished,' Julia thought. 'They had that lovely day and the soup tureen and meat dishes, servants with frills and streamers, children. They set out that day as if they were laying the foundations of something. But it was only something which perished very quickly, the children scattered, the tureen draped with cobwebs, and now the widow, the bride, perhaps at this moment unfolding her napkin alone at a table in a small private hotel down the road.'

The smell of burning sausages could not reach beyond the archway. Julia remembered and leapt from the chair. Eleanor dealt out odd forks and some knives like scimitars over the tablecloth.

"This is what they call a 'cruet'," she told Roddy, who came in rubbing his soap-smelling hands. He smiled at her.

Julia came in with the pound of burnt sausages lying on the smallest dish.

"You can't expect mustard on the first night," she warned Roddy, who thought what a very few seconds it would have taken to mix. Two and a half sausages for her and Eleanor, three for Roddy. There was bread and cheese as well, and some egg sandwiches left over from the train.

"I could wish for a drink," said Julia, passing her hand over her face in great weariness.

"I can't take you into the Ante-room to-night," said Roddy in a satisfied way. "It isn't ladies' night."

"Can't we have a drink in this damned place, without relying on the caprice of a lot of officers? And are there no pubs?"

"Only down in the town. This is a residential district. If you go, you will have to take the bus, and when you get there it will be closing time."

"It wouldn't be worth it," said Eleanor quickly, lest she might be left to the washing-up.

"Ladies' night!" cried Julia in a fury. "It sounds like a lot of red-faced Masons with wives in royal blue satin and pink carnations. 'We will put aside our secrets and our stories about copulation and give the old girls a break.' I couldn't go to one of those. My pride wouldn't allow it."

Eleanor, whose evening dress was royal blue, leant forward and said to Roddy: "What time do you start in the morning?"

"Nine."

'If I had Roddy,' thought Eleanor, 'my greatest happiness would be to go out with him to meet the other wives. Why should her pride not allow it?' She could not forgive Julia for wanting more than her own dearest dream.

"I wonder how long we shall be in this house?" mused Julia.

"For the duration. I've told you, you needn't worry," Roddy said. "I won't be posted now."

"The war might go on for ten years," said Julia, who was depressed beyond words. "Oliver might grow up to be a man in this funny place." She looked at Mrs Lippincote on her wedding day as she was often to look at her in the future. Nothing of her security, in these days. What would she have said to this? No home of one's own, no servant, no soup tureen, no solid phalanx of sisters, or sisters-in-law, to uphold her; merely—she glanced at Eleanor—merely an envious and critical cousin-in-law.

"Mrs Lippincote said she would call round at the end of the week," said Roddy, who had made the arrangements about the house.

"Oh, it is too bad!" cried Julia. "Is *she* always to be running in and out? To see if I have dust on the mantelpiece and . . . and to see if I am using the best china on a weekday. Which is the best, anyhow? It is all abominable."

"This would have cost the most," Eleanor said helpfully, picking up her bread plate and looking at the back of it.

"Oh, I daresay, we have yet to find the best and second-best," Julia said. "That corner cupboard will be filled to overflowing with it."

She got up and tugged at the green silk-covered doors of the glass cabinet. They creaked and came unstuck. Rows and rows of wine glasses shone in the sudden light, some with red stems, some with yellow, cut and coloured and frosted—champagne, port, liqueur, and brandy ballons.

"Jesus!" said Roddy, a little scared.

"Is there an inventory?" asked Julia, when she had turned the key.

"No. No one would take it on. God, I don't blame them."

"I was thinking I'd take all the ornaments from the

mantelpiece and bureau and lock them in the cupboards, but the cupboards are full."

She went to the bureau and opened the drawers one after another. All full: knitting-needles, playing-cards, paper-patterns, photographs (she foresaw a pleasant hour with those), some black-edged visiting cards and letters.

She felt burdened by Mrs Lippincote's possessions. "We shall never make a home of this," she cried.

"I wish you'd come to see it before you moved," said Roddy, reasonably, but uselessly. Eleanor concurred.

"But it sounded so nice," said Julia. "Big, and a lot of work, but cheap. And the plan you drew gave me such a pleasant picture of it. I imagined it all sunny . . ."

"So it will be," he said, and added: "On sunny days. It can hardly be sunny at this time of the evening and at this time of the year."

"It is not as if it were damp or anything," said Eleanor.

"It *is* damp," said Julia, "the kitchen is very damp." She felt at bay against the calm and decision of the other two.

"But we don't have to sit in the kitchen."

"Servants used to have to."

She felt suddenly exhausted, not knowing where to turn, or which was her worst enemy—Roddy or Eleanor or the house or Mrs Lippincote. Tears, as hard as bullets, pressed against her closed eyelids. She clapped her handkerchief to her face and fled from the room.

Roddy sighed, not from embarrassment, for Eleanor was his cousin and, living with them since war began, had seen Julia in tears more than once before; not from embarrassment, but annoyance.

Eleanor raised her eyes to the ceiling. "Over-tired," she said, as she might have spoken of a child.

"We are all tired," said Roddy gravely.

"I thought," Eleanor went on, with satisfaction, "I thought it was only spinsters who behaved in that neurotic way." She was forty and unmarried, she had a little money in Imperial Tobacco, a royal-blue evening dress, and was in love with her cousin, for whom, as they say, she would have laid down her life with every satisfaction.