
Opening Extract from...

Last Dance with Valentino

Written by Daisy Waugh

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For my mother, with love.

AMBASSADOR HOTEL

NEW YORK

Friday, 13 August 1926

I can still feel him.

I can still feel him, I can still smell him, I can still see the fold in my pillow where he leaned over to me … I can feel his tongue … his hands … his lips … his fingers in my mouth. I can still taste him. Only a moment ago he was here, with me, and I can still hear the sound of the latch closing softly behind him. I can hear his voice and his laughter fading as he moves away down the hall.

We made love for hours; all night and all morning and late into the afternoon. Mr Ullman must have telephoned him a hundred times, until finally he pulled the wire from the wall and sent the whole wretched contraption flying to the ground. And we lay quietly, talking in whispers, smoking cigarettes, covering our laughter, even while Mr Ullman was outside the door to the suite, imploring him to come out, to pick up the telephone at least, and to talk …

In any case he had to leave our bed eventually, of course. There were people waiting for him. Thousands of them – waiting only for him. What a feeling it must be! I can't

even imagine – I'm not sure I really even want to. But that is his life now, for better or worse. It was what he wanted, all those years ago. Or, at least, perhaps, it is the price of what he wanted – and today I see him carrying the burden of his extraordinary success with that sad, delicious grace, which is so much his own, and which so entirely melts me. Which melts us all, I think.

So – now what? I watched him dress. In evening clothes, for such a dazzling occasion. I lay in this enormous, sleek black bed, and watched him as he prowled, his footfall soundless, from dressing room to bathroom and back again. He stood before the glass at the beautiful Chinese dressing-table and told me about the time, only last week, when he had come away from an appearance like this evening's – a movie promotion of some type. At his arrival the crowds became so carried away that extra police had to be called. They had mauled him as he fought his way through from theatre to automobile, torn the buttons from his coat, and a great chunk from the lining of his jacket – one woman had clung to his tie and swung: '*And I wanted to say to them all …*' he told me, that soft, deep voice, smiling, talking only to me, '… *I wanted to say but, girls – ladies! Are you all quite mad? Can't you see I am only a man? Just another man. Go home to your husbands!*' That was when he turned, came across the room to me, lying here, and he leaned over the bed and kissed me once more, one last time; a perfectly tender, perfect kiss – '*… what you see is nothing but an illusion. Nothing but a dream…*'

'Not a dream to me,' I told him. 'I hope. You're not a dream to me – are you?'

He shook his head. 'No, Jennifer,' he replied, his hand on my cheek, finger tracing my lips. 'I think *you* are the dream, *cara mia* … All this time I have been waiting, and wondering, and hoping … hoping against hope … and finally…' He

sighed. 'But I wish you would stay tonight. Or at least let me get you a room of your own. You'd be far more comfortable. And safer. And closer. And then maybe you could accompany me tonight – if you wanted to. Or maybe you would let me come to you later and then – Jenny, if you were here, in the hotel, we could be quite discreet. Quite unobserved …'

Cara mia.

He has been waiting for me all this time.

But I can't let him get me a room. I can't go with him tonight. I think we both understand that.

'Will you be here for me when I return?' he asked.

I replied that I would be in my own hotel room on 41st when he returned, preparing for my meeting with Miss Marion. He nodded at that. So, I said to him, I would return to my hotel and sleep, and wait for him to telephone me there.

'Tomorrow, then,' he said. ' After you have seen Frances. I shan't distract you, I promise. And then, when you're finished, I shall send all sorts of messages. I shall inundate you with messages … I shall telephone you every half an hour. That is,' he stopped suddenly, 'if I may?'

If I may! I laughed aloud. And after a polite hesitation, he laughed too.

For I am his completely. We both know it.

Now, it is my turn to wait. Again. It is Lola Nightingale's turn to wait. Or Jennifer Doyle's turn, I should say. Jennifer No-one from Nowhere must join the long line …

– – –

Last month he was voted the Most Desirable Movie Star in America by the quarter-million astute readers of *Photoplay.* Hardly a surprise, after all … He has lit a fire in us all. Every woman in America! But I have loved him since long

before the others, I have loved him from the moment I first laid eyes on him – that airless night ten years ago … 11 August 1916 … Ten years, one day, nineteen hours and twenty minutes … It was my first night in America, and he was as lonely as I. Fighting, just as I was, only with better grace and a bigger, warmer, bolder heart, for a little space in this brash new American world…

And now I am alone in his bed, with our salt on my skin, the taste of him, the feel of him glowing, still, in every corner of my being – and he is returning to me because he loves me. *He loves me.* And I have always loved him.

– – –

I need to leave. I begin to think it's a little mawkish to be lolling here in this crazy, beautiful bed – now that he is gone. I should get the hell out of this beautiful, warm place before the maids come in and gawk at me, and imagine I am simply another of his little fans.

Only I feel too feeble. I feel so dizzy – I don't have any strength left, not to sit up, let alone to stand … So I shall lie here, mawkish or not, and I shall do what I always do in times of confusion, disorder, disarray, complete and utter madness …I shall scribble it down on paper. On his own embossed writing paper, nothing less, since I have found it lying here … And then the mental effort of ordering my thoughts will force me to some sort of stillness, just as it usually does.

– – –

I heard a couple of ladies paid Mr John Barrymore's valet $2,000 in fresh new dollar bills a short while back so as to be let into his bungalow over at Warner while he was out; and they hid in his private bathroom until he wandered in from the set and then, in a great burst, the

ladies jumped right out in front of him! Heaven knows how Rudy might have responded. In any case, the great John Barrymore was too well fizzed (*quel surprise*) to give it even the slightest notice. He simply looked at them, from one to the other, and smiled, and then as the poor girls almost died right there before him, he gave them a low bow, and said, 'Care for a little moonshine, ladies?' And, yes, as it happened, they did! Cared for a great deal more than a little moonshine, I understand. Cared for all sorts of things. So much so, indeed, that I believe the valet was even permitted to keep his job! But never mind that. Never mind them.

He loves me. Rudy loves me. And I am not just a fan. I am not just a lady in search of moonshine. I am a professional person, for God's sake! A paid-for professional writer of Hollywood photoplays. At least, I am about to be. Frances Marion has telegraphed to say they will surely buy the first one and with her recommendation they surely will, since all Hollywood listens to Miss Marion… And really, quite suddenly, everything in my crazy life is too unimaginably wonderful, and I have not the faintest idea what I may have done to deserve it.

But I should leave! I *must* leave! There is the new Marion Davies picture showing at the Strand, and Frances Marion says I must see it before our lunch together. But of all the movie theatres in New York, could it not have been showing at any other? It's where we saw the Mary Pickford picture, he and I, on that awful, terrible night.

And then afterwards we took a taxicab with all our winnings, and he came with me to surprise Papa for supper … And I suppose that was where it started. Not with the secret dance on the lawn that first warm night, and my mind spinning, and the sound of the Victrola seeping out through the moonlight…

You made me love you …
I didn't want to do it

Ha! How I remember that song!

… You made me want you …
And all the time you knew it

… Not with the secret dance that first night. Not quite. A little later, I think. Of course, it was at Papa's that it started.

SUMMER 1916

I must begin with leaving England, I suppose, and with my father, even if normally I try my best to avoid thinking of him. Only today, and yesterday – in the midst of so much happiness – suddenly I discover I can hardly keep him from my mind.

Papa must have drawn the sketch of me from memory, alone in that awful boarding-house. He must have drawn it at the very end, when I half believed he was capable of nothing. In any case, even if there had never been the sketch, and Rudy never *had* kept it all this time, and never *had* shown it to me as he did, only yesterday – and taken the wind from my lungs, so that I thought I might drown – I must still remember him. Because in spite of everything he was a wonderful man – and I loved him. I loved him dreadfully.

Papa and I were only ever meant to come to America for a short while. It was summer 1916, and since neither of us was much able to make a contribution of our own, we thought we would leave the war behind, which had already taken my brother, and my father could finally start to work again.

The trip was another of Papa's Big Ideas; it was the Big Idea, like all the others before it, which was finally going to rescue us. We believed it, he and I.

We embarked on that long voyage – the one that was going to save us – with only each other in the world to care for. I had no memory of having met our American benefactor, John de Saulles, whom my father assured me would be waiting for us at the other end. But Papa swore we had been introduced in the spring, at the Chelsea Arts Club, where my father and I used to spend so many evenings together. He tended to forget that during those long nights I often used to peel off on my own, hide away and read or, more often, simply fall asleep.

They were like peas in a pod, the two of them: utterly feckless, and hopelessly, faithlessly – lethally – addicted to a certain type of woman. Mr de Saulles had been in London the previous few months, on some sort of business, I don't recall what. It happened to coincide with a time when my father was especially desperate for money, having blown his last of everything, once again, on who knows what? Mr de Saulles had visited Papa's rented studio, and after plenty of bartering (something Papa took a great and uncharacteristic pleasure in), my father had made a painting of Mr de Saulles, in exchange for which Mr de Saulles had not only provided the paints (or so I assumed, since Papa was often so broke he was unable to finish a work for lack of materials) but also paid for his and my passage, second class, to America.

Mr de Saulles wanted Papa to paint his wife, a celebrated beauty. Also his mistress, a celebrated professional tango dancer (named Joan Sawyer. I was quite a dance fanatic back then and I had read about her, even in England). Since, by then, Papa had infuriated virtually everybody who might have been inclined to employ him in London, either by delivering botch jobs horribly late or – more often – by taking the

money but failing to deliver anything at all, and since, with the war, portraiture was not in very high demand in London at the time, and since Papa was almost certainly broken-hearted again, we took up the offer.

The tickets were hand delivered to Papa's rented studio on 27 July 1916. On 6 August, we had packed up our few possessions and boarded the great *Mauretania* for New York.

I shall never forget how the two of us stood on deck, quite silent, as that vast ship pulled slowly out to sea. Side by side, we stood, surrounded by noise: the ground-shattering bellow of the ship's horn, the whistling and weeping and the weeping and cheering of passengers on either side of us, and from the decks above and below us; and together we looked back at the Liverpool dock, where not a soul in the great waving crowd was weeping or whistling for us … It seemed unimaginable to me then that we would not return to England again.

In any case, we watched until we could no longer make out the faces on shore. I was tearful, feverish – half wild with every crazy emotion – grieving for my brother and my unremembered mother, and for England, and for myself a little.

I longed to speak, but couldn't quite summon the confidence. So it was Papa in the end, with one of his heavy, melancholic sighs, who finally broke our long silence.

Ah, well, he said.

And he turned away. From me. From the shore. From everything he and I had ever known. My father presented himself as a man of the world, and he was, I suppose, in a way. But he had never left England before, so perhaps he was afraid. Or perhaps he already knew, as I didn't yet, that the wonderful, whimsical era of Marcus Doyle and his Big Ideas was edging ever closer to its tired and unfulfilled finale.

Or perhaps he might have been searching for somebody in the crowd, hoping until the last minute that some beautiful, familiar woman might appear from the midst of it and beg him to turn back again. Poor Papa. Since ever I can remember there was always a woman, always absurdly beautiful, always breaking his selfish, silly, fragile heart.

I said, impertinently, because usually it lifted him a little when I was pert, and in any case I needed to talk – to say anything, just to make a noise, 'You oughtn't to worry, Papa. I understand there are ladies galore in the city of New York. Some of them quite intelligent. And not all of them hideous.'

He smiled rather weakly. 'Thank you, Lola. You're very kind.'

Papa used to call me Lola. I never knew why. He didn't like the name Jennifer, I suppose. It's why I chose it, of course. When the choice was mine.

'But, Papa, you may find them alarming at first,' I continued facetiously. 'Mostly they are entirely fixated with the vote. So I read. Much more so than the average Englishwoman. You may have to become a "suffragist" if you're to make any progress with the American girls.'

He laughed at that. Which thrilled me. He ruffled my careful, seventeen-year-old hair, which, I remember, thrilled me rather less. 'Come with me, my silly friend,' he said to me. 'Come and entertain me, will you, Lola? While I get myself a little stinko.'

It was how we spent the voyage. It was how Papa and I spent the greater part of all our time together actually, once my brother had died – or since probably long before: since Mother died and Marcus was away at school and it was always just the two of us, on our own, with him a little stinko, and me trying my darnedest to keep his melancholy at bay.

Dear God, this heat! This sticky, dirty, airless warmth. So much is different since I left the city all those years ago, but the New York summers don't change. They remind me of August at Roslyn. It reminds of everything I would most like to forget.

I am writing this in a wretched little café just a couple of blocks from my own flophouse … Oh, and what a come-down it is! The Ambassador Hotel has its own air-cooling system – of course. As one might expect of such an ultra fine and modern hotel. It lent Rudy and me a magic, secret climate of our own, up there in our private paradise. I had forgotten what the rest of Manhattan was enduring. – Not that I care! Nothing in the world could bring me down tonight—

Ah! The little dooge has come with my eggs at last. I thought I might die from hunger … devilled eggs and buttered toast … I never saw a more welcome sight! And more coffee, too. And I have asked him to bring me a large slice of chocolate cake and some fruit Jell-O. And some ginger ale and some vanilla ice cream. And more toast. Good God, I'm so hungry I could swallow the whole of it in a single mouthful then order it all again – except I'm not sure I have enough money in my purse.

Is he thinking of me?
Is he thinking of me now?

But if I continue along those lines I shan't be able to eat a thing, and it's hopeless, because I must or I shall probably faint in this dreadful heat. I've hardly eaten for days. It would be too horribly embarrassing.

I must keep writing. About the beginning – when Papa was still here, and it was only the two of us, thrown together on that great big ship, setting off to start our new life together.

It's strange. I've not dwelled – purposely not dwelled – on the beginning, not for all these years, and yet suddenly, tonight, it comes to me in a rush, as vivid as yesterday. I remember what I was wearing – the little shirtwaist with the embroidered daisies at the buttonhole … I remember that, and how splendid I felt in it. I remember the feel of my new rabbit-skin stole, too hot for the day, but which I wore because Papa had only given it me the day before, when I was crying because we were leaving our home. (And I'm convinced, by the way, that he had always intended to give it to another girl entirely. He looked quite rueful as he handed it over.)

I remember what Papa was wearing, too. He was a handsome man: tall and slim and athletic-looking, with eyes of dark blue and thick, golden-brown hair – speckled grey, by then, I suppose, but always golden brown in my memory. I've said he was a handsome man: perhaps it's an immodest moment to observe that he and I looked rather alike. We have the same colouring and similar build. The same nose – it looks better on a man – straight and long; the same square, determined jaw; the same dark blue eyes and angular face.

He was elegant – always. I remember the jaunty angle of his boater hat, and the familiar hint of his cologne as we stood side by side on that vast deck, and the smell of the crumpled pink azalea in his lapel. He had taken it from Chelsea at the crack of dawn that same morning, just as we were leaving our rented cottage for the last time – plucked it, with that roguish laugh, from the front garden of Mr Brampton next door. It was an act of half-hearted defiance, of course, of playfulness and sentimentality, which was somehow typical of my father. My wonderful, magical,

wicked, feckless, faithless father. I miss him. God, I miss him still.

– – –

So, our vast ship slipped away from England and the war, and five days followed, surrounded by sea: long, strange, empty days they were; and while my father drank, and charmed our fellow passengers with his usual elegance and wit, I talked too much – couldn't stop myself – and mostly sent them scurrying away.

The sixth morning dawned at last, not a moment too soon: Papa and I were setting each other on edge. I could feel his impatience – the suffocating coat of boredom that wrapped every word when he addressed me. And there was something else too, perhaps, now that I think about it. He had grown increasingly ill-tempered as the journey progressed. I would glimpse him sometimes, gazing at me as a prisoner might gaze at their jailer, as if culpability for everything – all his torment, all the little irritations of our journey, the sourness of his wine, pain in his toe, the ache in his heart and head – should be laid somehow at my door.

In any case I left him at his breakfast table that final morning, not eating, since he never much ate, mostly muttering to himself about the horridness of all things American. I left him alone and joined the other passengers on deck to catch a first view of land.

Oh! I will never forget it! That first thrilling glimpse of Manhattan – how it rose from the golden haze; glistening with boastfulness in the dawn light – it moved me in a way nothing in old England ever could … I had imagined 'skyscrapers'; Father and I had discussed them at length (he detested the mere notion) but to see them in reality, soaring triumphantly against that pink morning sky, so proud, so

ambitious, so completely *extraordinary* – I had never in my life seen a sight so beautiful. Even today they take my breath away.

My father, when he finally emerged on deck, decreed them 'hideous', just as I had known he would: 'If the good Lord, in his infinite wisdom, had wanted us to live suspended in mid-air in that undignified fashion,' he said, scowling across the water, 'he'd have given us wings.' After I failed to respond to that, Papa wandered back to his empty dining-table, I think, and I stayed where I was until we docked.

And then what? A blur of everything, I suppose: a whole lot of noise and energy and mad confusion … Papa coming to life at last, striding importantly off the ship as if poor, wretched New York couldn't possibly be expected to survive without him a moment longer … And me, left behind again, organising our paltry luggage, coming ashore and searching desperately for him through the crowd.

It was a sweltering morning, and the pier was teeming; a monstrous, roaring jumble – or jungle, it seemed to me – of steam and smoke; motor-cars and carriages, porters, passengers and officials; and the clatter of horses' hoofs and the spluttering of automobile engines, and above it all, the constant hammer and crash of construction, here and there and everywhere, and far off in the distance, from towering metal skeletons, there were little men, like insects in a spider's web, riveting together more buildings to add to the madness of that crazy, beautiful skyline … So, we stood there, waiting, jostled this way and that: the failed English Portraitist, who drank too much, and the Failure's daughter; I was mesmerised by the little men in their metal webs – I was mesmerised by it all. But, of course, I was lucky. I was young and – unlike my father – I had never really shone, so could never feel the shock of my insignificance quite as he must have felt it that morning. I think

perhaps it frightened him, to feel so utterly, infinitesimally small.

After what felt a long while, with the two of us standing there – dumb and simply staring – I dared to ask my father if perhaps our mysterious benefactor had provided us with an address. Papa began to rifle half-heartedly through the pockets of his linen coat. But he seemed to be on edge. Even more so than before. He kept glancing at me, as if on the point of saying something, only to lose his nerve and fall silent again. Finally I asked him what was the matter. Had he lost the address? Was his friend not likely to come? Did his friend, perhaps, not even exist?

He looked pained.

'Lola, old girl,' he said, at last (and I knew at once we were in trouble. He only ever called me 'old girl' when he had something dreadful to say). 'There's something I've been meaning to tell you. The, er … that is – the, er … *As you know—*' Abruptly, he stopped patting his pockets, straightened up and looked at me.

He looked– what did he look? What did you look, Papa, just that instant before? *Sorry*? … Yes, I think so … *Shamefaced?* … Gosh, yes. Like an animal caught in a trap. 'Dear girl,' he said – boomed, rather, over all the noise. 'I am not – that is to say, *we – we*, you and I, are not blessed with a pecuniary – pecuniary … How does one put it?' He took a breath and tried again. 'The time has come, old girl, now that you're – we're – now that we've arrived here, adults, and so on … The time has come for the two of us to address the *perennial deficiency of funds* at Ranch Doyle, such ranch that it is… Peripatetic ranch … and so on. It is, or has been, as you may or may not be aware, a constant struggle for your old papa to keep ahead of things …'

Ahead of things! My poor father! I'm ashamed to say I laughed.

'It has been a *constant struggle* to stay ahead of matters. And now that you yourself are a young lady – and a *remarkable* young lady, I may add – I was rather beginning to think … that is to say … *What I have done* … Oh, Lord … Perhaps I should have mentioned it earlier …'

I began to feel a little sick. 'Papa, for Heaven's sake …' Over all the noise my voice was barely audible even to myself. 'For Heaven's sake, tell me – what should you have mentioned earlier?'

'Only I didn't feel it would be very pleasant to disrupt our very pleasant journey … What I have done, old girl, may take you a little by surprise. But I assure you in the long run it is with your own interests very much in my mind … at the *forefront* of my mind … that I have rather taken the matter of the, er, perennial *pecuniary deficiency* at our albeit rather peripatetic ranch into a new dimension … a new chapter, so to speak. That is to say … Lola, darling, when my kind friend Mr de Saulles offered to – ship us out here, he very sweetly made a suggestion regarding your own future, which I'm certain – I'm *absolutely convinced—*'

'Misster Doyles? Misster Marquis Doyles?'

A strange man was peering down at my father. He was pale and extraordinarily tall, with white-blond hair slicked back from a huge, worried face, and a long chin that curved disconcertingly to one side. He was in his forties, possibly fifties; ageless, actually. And he was frowning – that eyebrowless frown with which I would grow so familiar.

There weren't many who could peer down at Papa. Justin Hademak, the crazy Swede, must have been six and a half foot or more. He was a giant. 'Misster Doyles?' he repeated. 'Iss it you?'

'Aha!' exclaimed my father, joyously, noticing him at last. 'Saved by the bell. So to speak.'

'You are Mr Doyles?'

'Marcus Doyle. At your service. Jolly clever of you to spot us. You're rather late. But no matter.'

'Of courses.' The giant bowed his head – it was absurdly formal – and flashed an unlikely smile. 'I apologise. Unfortunately, at the moment of leaving, the mistress suddenly required the motor-car … with utmost urgency ...'

'Don't think about it for a second, old chap,' my amiable father assured him. 'When a lady requires a motor-car, she requires a motor-car!'

'I am sent by Mr de Saulles,' he continued, my father's charm or humour – or whatever it was – quite lost on him, 'but I am right to think you are indeed the portrait painter? It is important I locate him correctly. You are the renowned portrait painter from England, coming to America on the appointment of Mr John Longer de Saulles?'

'I do solemnly declare that I am he,' said my father. 'Back me up, Lola, won't you?' he stage-whispered to me, above all the racket. 'I'm not certain he believes me.'

'And you are the daughter?' said Mr Hademak.

I nodded.

'You know, I'm almost certain de Saulles sent me a bit of paper, with all the particulars and so on, and I think he may even have mentioned you … a tall gentleman …' My father was patting his pockets again. '…only it seems to have disappeared. Lola, do you suppose I may have given it to you?'

There was no opportunity to reply. Mr Hademak had taken a brief look at our travelling trunk and, in one easy swoop, bent from his freakish height, lifted it onto his shoulders and lurched headlong into the crowd. We had little choice but to end our conversation and follow him.

'I am to put Mr Doyle into a motor vehicle and send him to Mr de Saulles in the city,' the man shouted behind him. 'Mr de Saulles is *most* impatient to see you again, Mr Doyle. You are to lunch together at Sherry's, and afterward to join

Mrs de Saulles for dinner at The Box … And the daughter …' he glanced back at me, not with any hostility, or with the slightest hint of interest '… Mr de Saulles says you are to drive with me to The Box directly. The mistress wants … that is to say she doesn't want …' He tailed off. 'You are supposed,' he tried again, 'to begin your employment at once.'

'To begin my …' I think I may even have laughed. 'Papa?' I turned to him. He looked away. 'My employment … as what?'

'Not quite *employment* …' my father muttered sheepishly. 'Only the poor little chap's got a Spanish accent, Lola. Y'see … *That's* the thing. And he's only four. Or nine. Or something frightful. He terribly needs someone to talk to … And then there's dear Mrs de Saulles, hardly much older than you are, Lola, miles away from her native land and *abysmally* lonely most of the time. It'll only be for a couple of months …'

I didn't say anything. I was too shocked – I had no idea what to say. I remember my silence seemed to annoy him. 'Really, Jennifer, darling,' he began to sound slightly peevish, 'there's no need to pull that long face. They're excellent people. My friend Jack de Saulles is … top notch. And Mrs de Saulles comes from one of the most spectacular families in Chile. In fact I have a feeling her uncle might even be President. For example. And if he isn't he certainly ought to be. In any case, darling, even if he *isn't*, I don't think you should complain when I arranged it all so nicely for you … Entirely because I was so utterly convinced you would enjoy yourself … '

'So … But we shall be living in different places?'

I could feel him itching to slide away from it all. How he longed for this conversation to be over! 'Yes and no. That is to say, I shall be in the city mostly, at their apartment. But it's all part of the *same family*. And I shall be travelling to see you during the week, of course. Or as often as I can … It's

really not far at all from New York. Only an hour or so by the train, Jack tells me … In any case it's hardly up to me, is it?'

It seems ridiculous, I suppose, because I was a grown woman, with a father who was constantly broke, and of course I hadn't a penny of my own – but it had never passed through my head, never, not even for a moment, that I should play any role during our great American adventure beyond the one I had always played: that is to say, to be hanging about with Papa in a daughterly fashion and occasionally slipping off to fall asleep.

But it was not to be. And why should it have been? No reason. One cannot remain a child for ever. Only I had been his constant companion for as long as I could remember. And the news that we were to separate came as a dreadful shock. I suppose, if I wish anything, I wish he'd had the courage to break the news to me a little earlier, so that I might at least have had time to prepare myself … It's too bad. It doesn't matter now, in any case. In fact, I am grateful it happened, and not simply because it allowed me to meet Rudy.

However, I was not grateful then. As I stood there on that crazy, bustling, deafening pier, the thought of being apart not just from my home but from the only person in the world I loved, or who loved me, filled me with nothing but a clammy dread. I looked across at Papa – still hoping, I think, that his face might break into one of those wonderful, wicked grins, that he might slap me on the back, as he did sometimes, always much too hard, and laugh, and tell me he was teasing.

But he didn't look at me. Carefully didn't look at me, I think. 'Righty-ho!' he said. 'Jolly good. Well, take good care of my little Jennifer, won't you, Mr … Mr …'

'Hademak. Justin Hademak. From Sweden…'

'Hademak. Of course you are. From Sweden. How delightful. Lovely. Well, jolly good.'

Mr Hademak put my father into a taxicab. Papa and I kissed each other briefly, without eye contact. I was afraid I would cry. He muttered something – *good luck, old girl* – something feeble, and not in the least up to the occasion. I didn't reply. Couldn't. And then, as he was driven away, he turned back to me.

I remember his expression, I see it now: it was as if he was apologising, and not just for this unfortunate incident but for everything. He looked awful: like someone else entirely – someone so old and so exhausted with the disappointment of himself it allowed me, briefly, to forget my own abandonment, and wonder, for the first time, what might become of him without me. He needed me more than either of us realised, I think. The sight of him, shrinking into the chaos, tore at my heart. It still does. He lifted his hat to me through the glass, and I think he whispered, *Sorry*. If he did, it was the first and last time … He never apologised to me again. Never. And he left me there, alone, with the giant from Sweden.

After Papa had disappeared into the great cloud of the city, Mr Hademak became (if it were possible) even more frantic than previously. Afterwards, when I knew him a little better, I wondered if he hadn't done it on purpose, charged on ahead in that crazy way, yelling out instructions and so on, if not as a kindness to me then at least to avoid the embarrassment of having to witness my collapsing into tears. I might have done it too – collapsed, that is – if he'd allowed me a moment to pause. I'm not at all sure I would have held myself together.

'*Excellent*,' he declared, without looking at me – with the trunk still balanced high on his shoulder. 'We must get over to the island right away.' (Ellis Island, he meant, of course: which island we had passed as we came in; and where the steerage passengers disembarked to have their immigration papers checked. And their hair checked, for lice, I think, too.) 'We must get over there *quickly*, though, Miss Doyle … So *keep up*!' I had to run to stay apace. 'We have to pick out a new maid. You must help me with that, young lady. They're all rotten. Since the war we only get now the bad eggs. But we mustn't fuss. Madame wants her motor-car outside the home … So we must pick out the first one we see who looks *at all* good. It doesn't matter a spot anyway. They never do stay long …'

The journey to Ellis Island took our little boat back towards the great statue that had so exhilarated me only an hour or so before; the freedom it celebrated seemed to have taken on a more menacing significance since then. Liberty was more than simply an idea suddenly, and how I longed to have a little less!

In any case, we bobbed along, Mr Hademak and I. Mr Hademak was too impatient to wait for the little boat to dock and he disembarked, with those ridiculous spider legs, when there was still a yard or two of water before the quay. And then, even before his foot had touched solid land, he announced as loudly as possible to the milling crowd that he was looking for a housemaid.

Immediately the crowd surged forward but it only infuriated him. 'No, no, no!' he snapped. 'Get off! Get *away!* No gentlemen today. Are there any Irish about?' Then, momentarily cornered by the swell, he turned to me. 'Miss Doyle,' he bellowed over their heads, 'don't just stand there. Find us a girl! And a sweet one, mind. Madame hates them to look drab. *Over there! See?*' He pointed behind me. 'See the little

group of Paddies over there? See the young one, with that terribly mad hair?'

The one with the hair – the unmissable, magnificent, golden-russet curls – was a girl of my age, maybe a little older. She was sitting on a black tin suitcase, slightly apart from the others, her sharp face turned towards us. She examined the blond giant, then looked at me. I smiled at her but she didn't smile back.

'*THAT one!*' he shouted at me, pointing irritably, batting the people away. 'With the mad, mad hair. YOU!' he yelled at her.

The girl looked back at him.

'*Ask her if she's looking for some work. DO IT!*' he shouted. 'Before someone else takes her! The good ones get stolen too quickly.'

So I turned to her, very embarrassed. 'The gentleman … you probably heard him. He wants to know if you're— '

'Is it board, too?'

'Why, *yess*! Most certainly it *iss!*' Mr Hademak cried, bearing down on us, his long white face sweating with the effort of having shaken himself loose at last. 'It *is* board. And a nice job, too. Twelve dollars a week. Better than you'll get anywhere else. With days off. Two days a month off! Do you want it, young lady? No or yes?'

She laughed. 'Do I want it?' She held out a hand to us, and I can picture her face now, the relief in her eyes, even while she was trying to hide it.

'You have family?'

'Back in Ireland. I'm here on my own.'

'Good. Like the rest of us, then.' He glanced at me, rather shyly, I think. Perhaps, even, with a whisper of a smile. 'Welcome to America, young lady. You have your papers?'

She nodded. 'I was only waiting for a ride to take me to the city.'

'Well, come along, then. Follow me. Hurry now. We can tell ourselves about names and everything else like that in the motor-car. Only we must hurry.'

He drove us at breakneck speed. It was all so new to me and yet, at the time, I was too wrapped in my miserable thoughts to take much notice. I suppose, before long, we had left Manhattan – I remember nothing of it, only the three of us tearing over a long, straight, impeccably smooth road to Long Island; a road that Mr Hademak was pleased to tell us had been built by a rich man as a car-racing track – until, after however many deaths, the racing drivers had refused to use it any more. He had cackled as he told us this, shaken his head at their eccentricity, and proceeded to drive faster along that dangerous road than I had – or have – ever travelled. Mr Hademak spent most of the journey shouting at us over the din of the engine. It made the veins stick out on his neck.

'Well well well … it is quite a household you ladies are coming to. Miss Doyle – I don't know what you may know of it already?'

'Almost nothing,' I replied bitterly.

'*Quite* a household,' he continued blithely. 'We have some quite colourful individuals who come our way. Oh, yes, we are quite the entertainers at The Box – as our little house is called. You will be most amused!'

Amused? It seemed unlikely. *Amused?* To have travelled so far, so full of fear and hope, only to be abandoned? To have arrived in that mythical new city at last, only to be whisked away from it? Actually, at that moment, I felt not so much amused, but as if a great wave of self-pity were enveloping me and, I'm ashamed to admit, tears were already stinging. I'm not sure I had ever felt so lonesome in my life.

Fortunately, neither Mr Hademak nor the Irish girl – Madeleine – seemed to notice.