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Opening Extract from...

Two's Company

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Chapter One

I am sixty-six years old: do not imagine too many wrinkles on my face, I have few, and people laugh when I declare my age. I look no older than in my fifties and still enjoy the privilege of being attractive. While small – I am five foot two – I do not feel at all small or fragile. Gravity, inexorably, does its deed, although my size is average and my shape overall quite good.

No longer being twenty, or even thirty, is certainly an advantage: I was resilient but ill-equipped in those days, gifted more with coping mechanisms than clarity. What wisdom I may have acquired is now regretfully accompanied with sadness and some cynicism, but because my blood courses healthily in my veins, I respond to sunshine and can still run and dance easily. When I attend the gym and exercise exhilarates my body, something joyful comes into play. Which makes the "life situation" all the more sore: I live alone, which can be a blessing (no one to bother me) although often too much of a good thing, particularly at weekends when my friends are busy with their own families. Holiday times are a painful curse, everyone seems to go on holiday in couples or with their children and grandchildren except for me: apart from one grown-up

daughter here in London and two vague cousins in France, I have no family. My daughter is the light of my life and a success story, but she lives with her boyfriend and has her own life, as it should be.

'Join groups!' say my friends, and advise day and evening classes, reading groups, language clubs, poetry workshops… . All very well, but however many – single – friends, usually of the same sex, I might make after some months, I would still find myself on my own most weekends (others will have families, an old parent…) and the Christmas and summer holiday periods make an exile of me, the time when I feel abandoned, unseen, unloved, unjustly unappreciated, and I rage and curse and grieve.

So what choice do I have? I say this grudgingly. I resent having to do this exercise as it may just be an excursion; I may shirk engagement and shrink and withdraw, having found the water too cold or hot, the current too strong; can't be bothered; too much hassle. It may of course also be fun: I catch myself chuckling: not dead yet, just give me a little amusement, a diversion, a recreation: for Heaven's sake, a little joy! Here my wisdom whispers: do not play with other people's feelings. And although they may be playing with mine, we are all tentative on this stage, we juggle with clouds…

Call me pragmatic by all means: it has to be done, and I would think about it less, calculate less, if this enterprise was simply born out of neediness, but I am no longer the romantic absolutist I used to be (too old, too worn out); so I have to be practical, efficient, and most of all realistic: common sense should have a crucial role to play, although I have a nagging suspicion that the senses, sensibility, and sensuality might eventually find their voice.

The approach is matter-of-fact, focusing in a hard-headed way on the main point of this endeavour: select, not merely

find, a worthy lover of my feistiness, a friend indulgent of my presumptions, a willing but not subservient escort in my ventures, a knowledgeable field guide to the new terrain, aware of the inevitable pitfalls, a kind teacher of his own experiences.

*

I have selected two advertisements so far. The first one says:

> – WELL-TRAVELLED, intelligent arts lover, retired, fit, solvent, sensual, seeks best friend and lover, probably 50s, n /s. London.

I judge it well-balanced, mature, honest. So far. I myself love the arts – indeed I have collected quality paintings and sculptures all my life and frequently go to exhibitions. 'Retired' means he will have leisure. The rest: 'fit, solvent, sensual' is reassuring if it is true. I know people lie: didn't I myself claim six years ago to be many years younger? And I lie a lot less than most, I am in fact quite scrupulous in this domain. So I shall ring him, or rather the voice box number given by the newspaper, in order to hear his longer spoken message, to which I will then decide to reply or not.

The second one is even better:

> – DINNER COMPANION WANTED by Cambridge graduate, 58, enjoys human nature, conversation and irony. If you are interesting, attractive and hungry, please call.

I am seduced by the humour, the evident maturity and the word 'conversation': give me good conversation any

time, I am hungry for it. As for hungry, God knows I can eat, and there are few things better than good food in good company. I want a date now, and cannot wait to hear his spoken message, but number one comes first.

*

'My name is Peter,' he says on his recorded message. He is sixty-two and lives in south-west London. He has worked in many countries and is a practical man as well as a lover of the arts. He is socially and politically aware and writes articles. His message is longer but this is all I am able to jot down and remember. His voice is educated without being 'posh' – a self-made man possibly? – I instantly envy his travels although they were for his work: maybe he no longer wishes to travel? I worry; though possibly he still loves it, wants to see more of the world, can I come too? We can talk politics.

I decide to leave a reply, describing myself as a professional woman, humorous, an arts lover too; I love books and nature alike and relish a good conversation on politics, social issues as well as psychology; I adore gardens and have a beautiful one myself; I am looking for a relationship based on friendship and mutual interests.

'My name is Ross,' says number two. He is asking for a dinner partner because he is a good listener, interested in people. He likes books, particularly by female authors like Anita Brookner and Barbara Pym: he likes the way women write about emotions, they get much closer to the truth, much more subtly, than male writers. He used to have a practice (he must be a doctor), but now lives and works in central London as an adviser to the government. He loves the buzz of London and keeps fit. He is a Taurean.

I like the way he talks, fluent and witty, and it so happens

I love Anita Brookner and have at least five of her books on my shelves. I leave a message, but press the wrong key and it is erased. I repeat it – at £1.20 a minute this is getting pricey. In my haste I am afraid I sound a little muddled. Did I give my telephone number? I say, twice, 'In any case, I wish you luck.' Silly woman. I hope he calls.

When I tell my daughter of my enterprise, she is outraged, understandable because she is both young and old-fashioned: she wishes me to keep busy, get a job of sorts, instead of looking for a man to sort my life out. She misses the point, I feel, but being a loyal daughter she still cares and asks: "Did you say you were pretty?" As it happens, I have forgotten. Ah, well…

Peter is the first to ring, the very next day: he sounds friendly enough, at ease, and is a fluent talker. We have a lot of things in common, apart from squirrels – a whole crowd of them seem to live in my garden – whom I love and he hates. Living in Dulwich, he is at the opposite end of the map to me. He has travelled widely and had even met Osama Bin Laden ("He was young at the time."). I certainly want to hear more about that – and about the fact that he writes for a right-wing journal: I would've dropped him instantly in the past on account of this alone as I think that our political choices come from a disposition of the heart, but I have become more tolerant, it is a question of degree – and we could have a good debate! Since we decide to meet this coming Sunday at Embankment station and he will be holding *The Sunday Times*, I shall make a show of my *Observer*. We may even laugh about it.

The next time he calls, we decide on a time and talk little: he is tired, slept badly last night, he is going straight to bed. Did he worry, I wonder. These exercises can be

nerve-racking if you are both needy and dependent on hope. For my part, hope isn't an emotion that I consider useful or even easy to come by nowadays, so I sleep like a log.

– Two-thirty inside the station, it's too cold to wait outside, we shall go and have a coffee somewhere nearby. What do you look like?

– I'm five foot two and blonde with short hair, and I'll be wearing a beige coat. And, by the way, my daughter tells me to say I'm pretty! I laugh.

– Really? You have told your daughter?

– Yes, and she completely disapproves of me!

– Oh, dear! Well, you could tell her she can come as a chaperone! Now, I am five foot ten, with white hair and a beard, and I shall be wearing a black coat.

That sounds rather smart.

*

I arrive on time and he is already there. At first glance I know I will not like him: there is something severe about him, apart from the fact that he is very unattractive: a swollen red lower lip hangs low on his face, giving him a disdainful look. Well, he didn't describe himself as good-looking so there is no betrayal there. I brace myself for an hour of dutiful conversation, but I mustn't be dismissive, he is an intelligent man.

– You are Hélène?

– Yes, hello Peter.

There is a twinkle in his eyes and he kisses me dryly on both cheeks. Why kiss me when we have never met before? I have no wish to be kissed. Does he think it's the done thing? What's wrong with shaking hands?

Almost as soon as we come out of the station, he ushers me into the first café we encounter, a crowded and noisy

place full of chattering women, the worst possible place for a leisurely first conversation, but I notice an empty table away from the crowd near the window and call him over. As it hasn't yet been cleared, he makes a big show, in a disgruntled way, of stacking up the dirty plates and the cutlery, the cups and saucers, finally sitting down. I put the *Observer* in my bag, he will have noticed it and I get a sense that he will have decided it set the tone: I was of 'the other side', a woolly liberal if not a dreadful leftie, he was wasting his time because he cannot stand these people. It's possibly the reason why he took me to this ghastly café. True, he had given me a clue when saying he wrote articles for a right-wing journal, but there are shades of right, and the subsequent *Sunday Times* didn't seem to announce anything very terrible. However, I feel a coldness in him, and I feel cold too, like a grown-up who knows certain things have to be done, patiently gone through with decorum and good manners if possible.

So we talk: he parked his car nearby; the advantages of London, so much to offer; the arts (he attends History of Art classes); gardens; squirrels and how to stop them eating the bird food. He doesn't laugh at all or even smile, and yet I have these lovely stories of blackbirds flying towards me for more raisins, and a squirrel sitting on the orangery chair… . They would be wasted on him, as was my initial mention of Dennis Healy, a very old man now, being interviewed with his wife on this morning's television current affairs programme. The mere mention of the old Labour adversary causes such a haughty expression of scorn that it stops me in my tracks. Dennis Healy had spoken of his love of photography and poetry and I was going to ask: did he like poetry too? I feel scolded. Obviously politics wasn't far away, was waiting to emerge, we are both political beings, interested in ideas and keen to take the

measure of each other. But where humour would have allowed an entertaining and possibly friendly debate, his sneers and obvious contempt, matched by my stubbornness and defiance are an admission not only of defeat but of enmity.

He asked not a single question about me, my life or my daughter, even though I questioned him about his career, travels and tastes: our disagreements about young criminals, sentencing and education turned to open conflicts when we broached New Labour: what has Tony Blair done? Just tell me one thing! he almost barks. – Well, the minimum wage for a start! – What? Five pounds twenty-five? – A good deal more than it had been for ages! – In any case, most of his policies have been Conservative! – I know, that's why I don't particularly like him!

The red lip has fallen lower still, the corners of his mouth are down, the contempt palpable: he is cross, and I am almost enjoying making this arrogant man angry.

He has drunk his coffee, me my hot chocolate; I was offered no cakes. We had talked on the telephone of going to the National Gallery, and it seems it is still on, neither of us wanting to have completely wasted our time or be rude by deliberately shortening the encounter.

– What would you like to see? he asks.

– I'm easy, there is so much that's good. How about seeing the Vermeers and then some Post-Impressionists? I think he no longer cares, he is simply being courteous. We are both going through the motions and know it, it won't be difficult.

– I think I should go home now, he declares flatly when we have finished.

– I've a bus just around the corner, I reply.

– I'll be in touch, he adds in a manner of goodbye and kisses me again, if one can call it that, two dry and ill-humoured pecks on my cheeks.

– Oh, no, you won't, I nearly retort, but say, clearly:

– I wish you good luck, Peter, bye.

That was it. Quite painless really. And I've seen enough of The National Gallery today to know that I want to come back soon and alone, at leisure.

*

The Dinner Companion hasn't returned my call: did I press the required key at the end of my message? I fear not. Shall I ring him again? Maybe he is too busy now, dinner every night for a month at least, there are lots of very good women out there. I liked his voice and humour, his charm in fact. Beware of charm, I counsel myself, it can be a trap – but so can every good attribute: so is there no alternative to good luck? For this is what I need, seeing that, as my daughter reminds me: "You always pick the wrong one" – including her father, she would agree, since he is as poor a father to her as he was a partner to me, a spitting image of my own father…I had met him at a party, but it seems I no longer go to parties nor do I give them. The world had shrunk, and as I try to manipulate luck, I will very likely end up succumbing to fate yet again; after all, who were the fairies at the side of my crib? Mummy-daddy, mummy-daddy, blindfold, whispering their sad wishes…

Chapter Two

The first time I ventured on the territory of encounters from a newspaper page was a year or two after my daughter's birth, over twenty-four years ago. It had been desperately sad coming home after work to a small child alone, with no one to share my daily joy at her discovery, have adult conversations with, no one who cared. I also knew, though, that a relationship was best left aside, for a long while possibly, for there was work to be done: I had to shed the skin and heart of the needy child I was and re-shape myself into a strong and confident – self-loving – woman, no longer capable of falling victim to immature and sadistic men. A tall order. But I remember meeting one man in a hotel lounge, who recited at length French nineteenth-century verse at me, and at one point hammered the table with his fist, declaring with passion: 'I want to live for ever!!'

I refrained from suggesting he may be disappointed.

When, after ten years of hard work on myself and celibacy, I met a nice man on holiday, I was at least reassured that I had progressed to the point where I could be treated lovingly at last, and felt lucky that, 'at my age' – sixteen years ago then – I had found someone decent, dependable

and a good friend. He could show my young daughter that fathers (he had two nice grown-up daughters of his own) and therefore men, could be kind, trustworthy and safe. The fact that Paul and I seemed to have the same tastes seemed serendipitous to begin with; but I soon realised that he only agreed with me on all matters because he amounted to very little, and desperately depended on merging with a woman and her approval to have any sense of himself. I came to understand that he had, in his childhood years during the war, acted as his mother's little husband during his father's long absence. This had been a time of bliss for him until his father's return, when his parents were happily reunited and he lost his role overnight, to be told to go and play outside.

I tried long and hard to convince myself that his qualities were all that mattered and, at 'my age', I should be thankful and sensible, but the shallowness of our conversations, the fact that we couldn't 'meet' as human beings and the platitudes that I was subjected to, were more than I could take.

Several years later I had finally put an end to my teaching career and since I had re-trained as a counsellor and no longer needed a large house, we moved to a smaller, cheaper one in a 'difficult' area. My daughter was finishing school, taking her 'A' levels and would soon be going to university; it crept up on me that I would no longer be an acting mother: a chapter was at its end, my lovely girl had grown her own wings, and I shouldn't be alone. A great void loomed ahead. It had been easy to fill my life with my daughter and my work and the house was often full of young people, but as with a cast in a play, everyone would leave after the curtain came down and a ruthless silence would occupy my space.

I had no friends who weren't married or gay, and didn't

myself frequent pubs or clubs of any kind except for a poetry workshop I had been invited to join by two of its members one evening: they had heard me read – a three minutes performance – at The Poetry Café. I was flattered and thrilled: so I was a real poet, and the workshops helped me progress. I got acquainted with an older poet who had taken a fancy to me, an Oxbridge man of some culture and hopefully self-knowledge (he had undergone several years of Jungian therapy after his divorce). Whilst he visited and brought chocolates and we shared a meal at his place or mine, I came to know some of his life story: he had been retired a few years from a job in industry and had recently separated from a woman he had lived with for some years after his divorce, a strange and irrational woman who kept accusing him of 'making things go wrong in the house'; he was well out of it. I sympathised with this pleasant, educated man, whilst knowing that all I wanted from him was decent conversation: he would be short-changed, since it was obvious he was after a great deal more. Talking to my friends, I have often jokingly described men of my age and older to be rather 'dusty' in the main: the way they so often age without keeping any shred of liveliness; their shuffling walk, the dull skin and eyes. Roger was rather dusty-looking to me, certainly unattractive and it never occurred to me that we would ever get close physically, the idea was rather repellent to me.

One evening, as we were sitting on my sofa talking of matters unrelated to any possibility of licentiousness, I was taken aback when he suddenly flipped, like a fish on the slab, and attempted to embrace me. I jumped back, primly crying out:

"No! No!" until he settled down again. We resumed the conversation for a while, a little dazed. I offered some more tea, politely pretending I wished to prolong the

evening, but after visiting my bathroom yet again he announced he would make his way home.

If I was quite relieved after his departure, I was also amused by this incident, and got ready to go to bed: I undressed and washed my face, knowing I very probably wouldn't see Roger again socially. Ah, well, such was life. When I tried to flush the toilet, nothing happened: the handle was limp. Being of a practical nature, I lifted the lid of the cistern, to discover that the rubber piece that links the lever to the siphon had been removed and lay at the bottom. This is when I remembered his 'absurd and irrational' mistress, the one who accused him of making things go wrong in the house, with a certain sympathy…

This incident left me perplexed: how do we know others, the ones we love, the ones we choose to live with, when such a small episode as this suddenly throws open a whole, unseen aspect to the person, a streak of pettiness, malevolence even, irrational at that – a dark poltergeist? I had known this man for years, we had poetry friends in common: when do we actually know people? If there was a lesson here, it was possibly that we never truly knew them. Picking someone out of the pages of a newspaper could hardly be more hazardous: they would naturally be economical with the facts, and besides, however much we may wish to tell others the truth about ourselves, we may not always know that truth…

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