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Signs of Life

Written by Anna Raverat

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Anna Raverat

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For Lola, and for Alfie, and for Vince.

It was a relief to know I had fallen
and could fall no further.

Sylvia Plath

One

Beginning this book, there is something you should know. This is not a confession. This is something I am writing; something I am making out of something that happened. Ten years ago I had an affair that ended badly. I have been trying to write about it ever since but I couldn't make it work and now I am beginning to understand why. I thought I had left the affair behind: there was a breakdown when it ended, a year or so of feeling numb, after that I got a new job, a new relationship that lasted a couple of years, later I moved house, gradually replaced all the clothes and shoes I wore during the affair so that one day I realized there was almost nothing left and I tried again to write it down. I suppose I thought there was enough distance, but it seemed I was still swimming in it, swimming against it, in fact.

A couple of days ago, I was reading a poem, and it wasn't the whole poem, just this bit of it, which broke the surface:

how in time you do *not* move on:
how there is no "other" side:

how the instant is very wide and bright and we cannot
ever
get away with it

Jorie Graham

When I read these lines I let out an involuntary *uh*, the sound of air being expelled by a low stab of recognition, a physical feeling in the belly, and I thought, *I am trying to get away with something*, and I sensed, for a moment, what I was trying to get away with, but it was so far back in my mind that it didn't have a shape, or not one I recognized as a thought or an idea. I wanted to haul it out and examine it and work out how to say it, but it moved quickly, like a small dark animal, and I only glimpsed its tail and haunches as it disappeared behind a ruined building. I panicked then, because I felt I had lost something terribly important, so I started searching and though I didn't find that creature, I began to unearth questions.

The first question was, what do I really know about what happened? Then a flood of questions and floating among them the awareness that I have not been honest enough and that was why I couldn't write well about it. Now I have to question what I think I know. I want to discover my part in it and take responsibility for that, if I can bear to.

What I have to work with are the questions, memories, and the notebooks. More scrapbooks than journals, my notebooks are like pockets for things I want to keep; in

them I copy lines of poetry, verses from songs, descriptions of dreams, that kind of thing. During and after the affair, I wrote, haphazardly, about certain events and transcribed the worst things that were said in a hard-backed notebook with yellow covers and lined yellow paper that I took from work. Although the contents of this notebook evoke what I liked at the time, what I thought was significant, the descriptions of what actually happened are of limited use because they are so fragmented, either because I was writing code in case someone found and read it or because I was in a rush. I probably thought I would always be able to decipher the scant notes but after so many years I find that sometimes I cannot. And then there is what I remember and of this, though a few things remain, much is lost. Memory is not a pocket. It's like this. Here's the story: there are holes in it.

Two

This is how it started: I kissed Carl. I was working late and so was he. There were a few others dotted around the building, which was normal because most of the workforce was young and keen. At about nine he came over to my desk and asked if I wanted to go for a drink with him. We had only known each other a couple of months. I should have said no, because if I wasn't going to carry on working I should have gone home to Johnny, but I was tired of my work, he was persuasive and I was persuadable. I know that I intended to have only one drink and then come back to the office and finish up because although I took my bag with me, I left my computer on and papers all over my desk.

I had been dimly aware of Carl as a new person at work but the first time I noticed him was one afternoon in March when we happened to leave the office at the same time. I suppose he had been at work six weeks by then. It was unseasonably warm. We stood in the car park in the lazy glow of late afternoon sun, talking about holidays. The

things that struck me were the stubble on his chin and the way he raised his head when he laughed.

Carl and I went to the bar just down the street. I liked this bar for its high ceilings and squat candles flickering in glasses on every table. No matter how busy the bar became, there was acres of room above everybody's heads, something luxurious about the unused space. I'm not sure whether the table hidden away in a nook in the wall was free when we arrived or whether we moved there after sitting somewhere else for a while. I don't remember how one drink turned to two, then more, or how he sat next to me on the bench we were sharing – was he turned to face me or sitting parallel? I don't know what we talked about, but I remember the quick energy of his face, his crooked smile and loud laugh. I remember that I drank a lot of red wine, but I don't remember what he drank. Neither Carl nor I had eaten any dinner, or at least I hadn't, and we didn't eat together. I smoked someone else's cigarettes, or bought some from the vending machine, something I did if Johnny wasn't around.

Somehow we got onto the subject of my sister's accident and the mood changed. I have a snapshot in my mind of how he was sitting just then, legs crossed, arms crossed in his lap, body inclined slightly towards me, eyes trained on me, mouth set in a way that lengthened his chin. His attention was a little unsettling, though I was grateful for his interest.

I remember this because it was a pivotal moment and because he was still new to me. Later I came to recognize that this was how he looked when he was concentrating.

My sister had been in a car crash a month before this night in the bar, and was badly hurt. There are only two of us, Emily is four and a half years older than me and we are close. I heard about the accident at work and Carl was there at the time, was kind to me, helped me get a taxi to the station. She's fine now (apart from a scar under her left eye) but at the time her accident was the worst thing that had happened in my life.

After asking how she was, Carl told me how sad I had looked as I left in the cab, and perhaps it was nice to hear that my outside had matched my inside. I was thinking about the loneliness of that taxi ride when Carl said, I wanted to give you a kiss; you looked so sad. I imagined him giving me a kiss on the cheek as I left in the taxi, the gesture of a closer friend than he was to me then. And then he said: Can I kiss you now?

Either because I was drunk at the time, or because it suits me, I don't remember what I said to Carl that made him go ahead and kiss me. Maybe it was a simple yes. And yet when he kissed me on the lips it was almost as big a surprise to me as when I found myself kissing him back.

A few days afterwards, I saw a woman in a supermarket who looked so much like me that I pulled up short to study

her. She was weighing out oranges, carefully selecting each one. I stayed out of her sight, even though part of me wanted to march up and announce our similarity.

She was tall, with long dark hair, even features, oval face. It was only when she spoke to the man she was with and I saw the shape of her smile and her neat little teeth that I realized we weren't that similar after all. I checked my reflection in the metal panel surrounding the bananas. The surface was smudged, so my edges were blurred, but I registered that I was bigger than this woman – not just taller but heavier, curvier. We both had long dark hair, but hers was glossy and well cut and mine was pulled back in a scrappy bun, my face was wider and because it was the end of a long day there was mascara rubbed in under my eyes, my cheeks felt droopy and my lips were dry. I redid my hair, making the bun perkier, and applied lip balm. When I noticed that my mouth was fuller than hers, I felt pleased, as though I had scored a point in an invisible competition. She was still picking out her oranges – so slow! I walked past, throwing a backwards glance to see if she had noticed me. She hadn't.

Although that kiss with Carl was the first, I can see that it was not the start of our affair. Something must already have existed between us to enable that kiss to happen. I enjoyed Carl's company because he was irreverent and he made me laugh, but I didn't think I fancied him. He wasn't conventionally good looking; his nose was large and bent at

the top where it had been broken once, and he was shorter than me – only slightly, but still.

I know other people had noticed his attraction to me because they teased him about me when I was nearby. Outwardly I ignored this while inside I was pleased with the attention. I was flattered, but refused to concede: it didn't suit me to have things that way round, and so I proceeded according to my version of reality in which Carl and I had a new and light friendship that other people couldn't quite work out. One day my assistant told me outright that Carl was obsessed with me. That's how he put it. Perhaps if he had phrased it differently I could have listened.

I loved Johnny. We'd been together five years, living together for one – no ruptures, no wrinkles, we were happy.

Johnny was gorgeous. Everybody said so. He was tall and broad, with the widest, most complete smile I have ever seen. Although youth and sport kept him trim, Johnny was prone to chubbiness; his good bone structure was always well covered. He had blond curly hair and brown eyes with thick lashes. Unusual, but he wasn't vain, which is not to say that he wasn't confident, he was, and sometimes arrogant but his arrogance wasn't about his looks. For instance, he refused to pay more than a few pounds for a haircut: the cheaper the better, as far as he was concerned. Once he found a place that scalped him for two pounds and

came home looking like a coconut. The scrawny covering they left made his features seem oversized; normally I was proud of his plump, high cheeks and Adonis jawline but now he looked like a caricature of himself. I pleaded with him not to go back to that barber's shop but it didn't affect the sense of achievement he reaped from the cheap haircut.

To begin with, I was hardly ever alone with Carl. We worked in a busy office and any lunches or drinks were shared with other colleagues. But there was a trip for work we went on together. In the lead-up, we were conspiratorial; Carl kept buying things for our journey – music, sweets, cigarettes. I was happy to see jelly babies in the pile on his desk and he noticed and said: Could I please see that smile again? I loved that he said please. His courtesy was probably the thing about him I liked the most.

We left the office with a sense of triumph – we had escaped, and together. We snaked our way through the city and when we hit the motorway I drove really fast to scare him but he only cheered. The cigarettes tasted as good and as dry as biscuits. He played a CD of an obscure American band. The music reminded me of cold rooms. He asked me if I liked it and I had to admit that I didn't.

When we arrived in Leeds it was already dark. After driving around for a while, we found our hotel, went in together and discovered they had messed up our booking,

had given us a double and didn't have anything else. Carl suggested we have a meal first, but I felt uneasy about not having anywhere to sleep so we got back into the car and drove on. At the next hotel, cheaper looking, Carl stayed in the car while I went inside.

The man at reception told me he didn't have any single rooms left, but he did have a twin and would that be all right? I would like to say that it was the hotelier's suggestion and the lateness that made me think it might be acceptable to share a room with Carl, but I admit that something inside me leapt at the chance. I remember this feeling as a kind of excitement. Perhaps it was an extension of the feeling I had when we drove away: that with Carl, life could take unforeseen turns. When I went out to tell him, I was elated. I had presumed it would be OK with him and it was. I see now that my behaviour on this occasion added up to an admission of attraction, but somehow, just then, I was convinced of my own innocence. At that time, I did not know how well I could lie. Once I knew what I was capable of, I stopped trusting myself and other people in quite the same style. Looking back, knowing I lied, I have to question everything.

A couple of weeks before the kiss, I felt it was time that Johnny and Carl met, and that I ought to meet Katie, Carl's girlfriend, so we arranged to see a band that Carl used to play with, he had been the drummer. It was strange,

presenting my private self to my work colleague and seeing his non-work self, like showing each other part of our bodies. I liked Katie, or else I wanted to like her and wanting to like her was enough like truly liking her to pass as the same thing. She had bobbed hair, thin lips, a sharp little nose echoed by a sharp little chin and her eyes were made up with swoops of black liner. Overall, she seemed pointy. All evening I tried to measure how well Johnny and Carl were getting on and whether Katie warmed to me. Because I was watching the evening more than I was engaged in it, I felt on the outside of what was happening. I couldn't dance because I was too self-conscious, and when I saw Johnny dance in a ranging, roaming way I cringed as if he were doing something embarrassing. On the way home I asked Johnny what he thought of Carl, expecting that my new friend had made as good an impression on Johnny as he had done on me, but Johnny only said something like, He was OK, I suppose, a bit intense – the band was good though.

I found out later that Carl had already decided to pursue me and was only interested in meeting Johnny to size him up as a rival.

Is it possible to make something happen by wanting it enough? Can desire be that powerful?

Carl's first impression was that Johnny was 'a bit handsome'. Yet Johnny's handsomeness didn't put Carl off

because Carl's mind was set. Desire alone is not, I think, enough to make something happen; you also need determination. I have experienced this in writing. Wanting to write is not enough. The trick, as P. G. Wodehouse said, is to apply the seat of the trousers to the seat of the chair. And to get the seat of the trousers onto that chair, day after day, and keep it there, requires desire, but also willpower. Desire and determination cannot guarantee the quality of the outcome, but they will get the thing written. Desire and determination were not enough to ensure a happy ending, but they got the affair started.

After the first kiss, Carl and I left the bar. The next bit I remember is walking through a housing estate not far from the office, a shortcut most of us used in daylight to get to the High Street. Probably we had decided to walk to the High Street to get taxis from there. We seemed to be in that housing estate for hours. There was talking, but I don't recall what it was about. Mostly, there was more kissing. Who are you? I kept asking him, but he couldn't answer me except with another kiss and each time that happened I asked him again, Who are you? Maybe I was asking myself that question. Maybe I meant, Who are you, that you can lead me astray like this?

He told me he'd fallen for me, hard. I brought up our partners and he brushed the mention aside as though they

were no matter and should not be allowed to intrude. Still, I lingered and we held hands and walked slowly and kissed again and again. I was drunk enough to not watch myself, but not so drunk that the strangeness of the situation was entirely lost on me.

Looking back, even though those kisses were deliciously reckless, the best moment seems to have been before the first kiss in the bar, when an acknowledgement of the tension between us was surfacing but still unconfirmed, and before I had done anything wrong. I see now that since I stayed on in the bar with him after that first drink, and stayed there for a long time, drinking and talking and smoking, that what I was doing was prolonging that moment, and perhaps I was also waiting to see how the moment would culminate and where it would go.

When I got home from the bar, it was almost one in the morning and Johnny was beside himself. My phone was switched off so Johnny called the office after ten and got through to Ivan the workaholic who was the only one left by then. Ivan said he had seen me working not long before and since my computer was still on and my desk was covered with work, that probably I had gone to the loo or nipped out for something and I would be back soon. Luckily for me, Ivan had not seen me leave with Carl. Johnny asked Ivan to leave me a note to call home as soon as I got back to my desk,

which of course I never did, so at eleven thirty Johnny got on his bike and came looking for me. He cycled round the streets near my office and by the time he arrived home it was well past midnight. I showed up just before he called the police.

I told Johnny that I had been in the pub with a crowd from work and that we had a lock-in and that I was sorry for being so inconsiderate. Incoherent, more like, he shouted. He could smell the booze and cigarettes on my breath and in my hair. We slept far apart in our king-sized bed, managing to avoid even brushing toes.