The Accidental

Ali Smith

He had sat opposite her at supper. She looked the kind of girl, no, the kind of good full adult woman, that you'd pick up in a car on the road and give a lift to the next village, then she'd get out of your car and wave goodbye and you'd never see her again, but you'd never forget it.

She looked like the dishevelled, flower-strewn girl in Botticelli's Spring.

He had got off the train surprised at himself. He had stood for a moment in the sun. He had stood watching simple sunlight glinting off his car in the station car park. He had felt strange, different, shiny under his clothes, so much so that on his way home he had begun to think he should maybe take an antihistamine. When he got home the Volvo was still in the drive. He parked his car alongside it. He walked round the side of the house. She was lying on her front in the garden examining something, like a girl. When he saw her his heart was a wing in the air.

He had made supper. He had made an excellent supper. Is she staying for supper? he'd asked Eve when she came in. I've no idea, Eve said, have you asked her to? He'd called to her in the garden, where she was lying on the grass with Astrid. Would she like to stay for supper? Astrid, sweet Astrid, called back that she would. Now she had pushed her chair back and left the table, gone upstairs, and Michael Smart had opened his eyes into what he knew was light, like a coma patient after years of senseless dark. He could see Eve. He could see Astrid. He could see his own hands like he'd never seen them. He had seen the light. He was the light. He had been lit, struck, like a match. He had been enlightened. He was photosynthetic; he had grown green. He was leafy and new. He looked around him and everything he saw shone with life. The glass. The spoon. His own hands. He held them up. They floated. He was floating, he hovered in air here on this chair. He was a defiance of gravity. He was fiery, full of fire, full of a new and uncorrupted fuel. He picked up his glass again. Look at it. It had been shaped in an intense heat. It was miraculous, this ordinary glass. He was it. He was this glass. He was that spoon, those spoons there. He knew the glassiness of glass and the shining spooniness of spoon. He was the table, he was the walls of this room, he was the food he was about to prepare, he was what she'd eat, sitting opposite him, looking straight through him.

She had ignored him over supper.

She had ignored him the whole time.

She had sat opposite him as if he wasn't there. He may as well himself have been an empty chair opposite her, a space, an innocent nothing. But he had made her car start. He had made an excellent supper. He would make warmed pears in hot chocolate sauce and then he would watch her cut with the edge of her spoon, scoop it up, put her spoon in her mouth and chew and swallow something that tasted very

Copyright © 2005 Ali Smith
Published by Hamish Hamilton / Penguin

good indeed, and scoop more food into her spoon and open her mouth for the spoon again.

Any minute now she would step back through the door into the room.

There she was now, in the doorway.

Copyright © 2005 Ali Smith
Published by Hamish Hamilton / Penguin