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# Grace and Truth

## Jennifer Johnston

It was the third day of the war when I returned from tour: major European cities, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, London.

I was whacked.

The tour had been a great success; and all that went with it had been fast and furious. Newspapers, TV stations, recep¬tions, smile, smile, smile. I was really truly whacked.

My jaw hurt from smiling.

My eyes were worn out with sparkling.

I don't mean to be a begrudger, but when something is over it is over and you should legitimately be able to relax.

At the party in London on the last night of the tour, the second day of the war, I had kissed Max Fischer, one of our producers, and said, 'You can count me out for New York. I ain't going to Noo York.' I scooted away from his reaction, which after a pause had been a hearty, angry laugh.

It had only been a rumour that had run around the company, but I knew that he had high hopes of Emmys and Oscars or whatever they're called, best thises and thats, dinners at Sardi's and fat men thumping him on the back and handing him cigars . . . maybe of course I've seen too many movies about show business. Thirty-seven weeks of The Playboy was enough for me, probably for ever. I had decided when the curtain came down that final night that next time round I would play the Widow Quinn and leave Pegeen to someone younger.

I know I've said it before but I really was whacked.

All I wanted to do was get back to my house in Goatstown, to Charlie, and pig out in front of the TV eating chocolates and watching the war.


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I love chocolates.

I love Charlie too.

Yes.

And my house. I had bought it ten years earlier after I had made my first film and when it was still possible to buy a house before you'd made your first million. Now the amount I had paid would scarcely get you a tool shed in someone's backyard. The house has a back garden about fifteen yards long. A few neat rows of vegetables at the far end, away from the house; a patch of grass, two plum trees and some quite well-tended flower beds at each side. There is a stone terrace between the house and the grass and here I grow herbs in tubs: parsley, thyme, sage, chives, basil (when the weather is very warm), mint, chervil and feathery flags of fennel.

I suppose you could call me a landed person.

Queen of all I survey as long as I look due west and blinker my eyes, like a nervous racehorse, with my hands. If I disposed of the vegetables I could fit a croquet lawn between the terrace and the fence at the far end. This is a serious cause for consideration.

Goatstown was by no means my first choice; I would have preferred a neat little house by the sea, Sandycove, Dalkey, that way, but the money wouldn't run to it. Now, though I probably have the money, I am happy here, with my house, with my neighbours. By and large we are a friendly bunch in this street; we smile at each other, pass the time of day, we take in parcels if needed and keep spare keys for moments of crisis.

Don and Jenny live on my right with their four children. A few weeks ago, while I was away, their father put up a mini-goal for them halfway down the grass and now they spend their evenings smashing goals home and swearing at each other. I think they enjoy the swearing as much as the scoring of goals.

I envy those children. I was never allowed to swear and I had no one with whom to play football when I was twelve, twenty-three years ago. Of course in those days football did not have the status that it does now. Even small babies being pushed in their buggies are dressed in the raucous colours of their parents' favourite team. No pink for a girl and blue for a boy any longer; they are colours too insipid for the modern infant.

My neighbours on the other side have no children; they have instead sleek cats, who sit on our party wall flicking their tails, or lie quite motionless under one of my plum trees waiting for some unsuspecting bird to hop by. I have always envied the cat its capacity for being quite motionless.

I was whacked.

Bloody, deadly whacked.


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I was sitting, feet up, on the sofa, watching the war on the television. Outside the spring was definitely starting; the evening sun was sliding down behind the hill, dappling the tops of the plum trees and flashing in the upstairs windows. On the screen words fell from the mouths of purposeful men. An American officer had just said with authority: 'They're not pausing. They are simply regrouping and considering their next move.' Light flashed behind him as he spoke; a huge golden ball spiralled in the sky. He looked very clean and well fed. Two small children appeared with their hands in the air, their black eyes rigid with fear. I heard the sound of the key in the door, then a pause and then the door slammed. 'Now over to Rageh Omaar in Baghdad . . .'

He threw his briefcase onto the hall floor and slung his coat over the end of the stairs.

I heard his step behind me.

'Isn't he sweet?' I asked.

'This is Charlie.'

'You're sweet too.'

He touched my hair with a casual hand. At the time I didn't know it to be casual.

'War games', he said.

'Unhunh.'

'Who's winning?'

'Who do you think?'

'No one.'

'Top of the class.'

I switched off beautiful Rageh Omaar.

We always eat in the kitchen unless we have visitors.

The room is a cheerful bright yellow, with doors that open onto the terrace, where, in the summer, my herbs scent the air. I am quite proud of that.

About eight thirty that evening the sun had gone, but the children next door were still shooting goals before they went to bed.

Move, you fucking asshole. Get your bloody feet off the ground. Now. Now, motherfucker. Oooo Jesus Christ, why can bloody girls not kick? I quit. The sound of a ball crashing into a flower bed. A door slams. Distant tears. Muuuummy.


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Charlie stood by the window rubbing at a glass with a drying-up cloth. Squeak.

'Where would you like to have coffee?'

Squeak.

'Here or in the other room?'

Squeak.

I put two mugs on a tray and watched the steam coming from the spout of the kettle. From next door came the sound of raised voices. Normal bedtime war games.

'Don't do that. It makes me feel sick.'

I poured water over the ground coffee.

'Charlie.'

He put the glass down and dropped the cloth on the floor.

'Here. This is OK. Here. Sit down. There's something I . . . something I . . .'

I put the coffee pot on the tray beside the mugs and sat down.

'. . . have to say.'

His forehead wrinkled. He came across the room and sat down.

There was a long silence.

I pushed down the plunger in the coffee pot. 'Cat got your tongue?'

He smiled briefly. 'I'm not quite sure how to put this.'

Another silence.

I poured out two mugs of coffee and shoved one across the table towards him.
'You're leaving me,' I suggested facetiously.

The steam from the cups drifted between us.

'Joke,' I said.

'Yes. I mean, no. It's not a joke. I'm leaving you.'

'Charlie . . .'


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He held up a hand, like policemen used to do all those years ago, on point duty. The flat side of his hand was towards me; I studied the lines patterning the palm: life lines, health lines, personality lines, success and failure lines. Nowhere could I see a this-is-the-end-of-a-marriage line. Nowhere. I leant closer. He was saying something to me. My heart was growing inside my chest. I could feel it filling the cavity in there; I could feel the thunder and beat of it growing. I wondered what would happen when the space was full. Would pain start? I hated pain. Would . . .

He was tapping with a finger on the table.

'You're not listening to me, Sally. You have to listen to me.'

I grabbed my mug and swallowed a mouthful of boiling coffee. That was pain. I choked.

'Sorry. I'm sorry. Could you say it all again. I'm listening now.'

'I – am – leaving – you.'

He spoke each word separately, quite clearly.

'Yes. I heard that. But I don't understand. Is this some foreign language that you're speaking? I need some translation.'

'For God's sake, Sally, don't try and be clever. I hate it when you do that. Four words. English words. I am leaving you.'

There was a very long silence while I tried to force the words into my brain.

'Going,' he said at last. 'Clearing out.'

Tappity tap tap went his finger on the table.

'I think we need to talk about this. I think . . .'

'There's not much to say.'

'There has to be. Years of saying. Why? You have to tell me why. Honestly, Charlie . . . I thought we were good together. I thought we were happy.'

'It isn't working.'

'We seem to be happy. Aren't we as happy as everyone else?'

He shook his head. 'Maybe you're happy. Maybe you don't know what happiness is.'

'Oh Charlie.'


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I felt tears building up behind my eyes. I blinked ferociously to make them stay there. He hated tears, I knew that.

'Charlie . . .'

His finger tapped viciously.

I took a deep breath.

'If this isn't working, can't we try and make it work? Tell me what I can do. Please. What have I been doing wrong?'

'You haven't been doing anything wrong. It just isn't working any longer. You know . . . you know . . . you know.'

'I don't know. Please tell me. I'm sure we can . . . we don't need to do anything drastic. Is it . . . is it babies? Charlie.'

'No. It's not babies. We've been through all that. Time and again. I feel, oh God this sounds so stupid, oppressed. Yes. That's it. Oppressed is the right word. I walk in here each evening and I feel oppressed, imprisoned. My life, this life, has become a prison.' He seemed quite pleased with that explanation. 'Yes. That's it.'

He stopped tapping with his finger and got up and walked over to the garden door and looked out. There was a streak of orange where the sun had been.

'But Charlie . . . I haven't been here for ages, weeks and weeks. How can you feel imprisoned? Hunh? How can you possibly feel oppressed?'

He frowned. He stepped a little one, two, three with his feet. He rattled the coins and keys in his trousers' pocket.

'You always fidget,' I said.

'Excuse me?'

'It doesn't matter.'

I wondered how I had allowed this to happen.

I filled my coffee cup again.

How had I so misunderstood the nature of marriage? I truly believed that what we had was liberty. Love, friendship, liberty. Now he talks oppression. Now. This moment, here in our kitchen.

Unasked-for tears were rolling down my cheeks. I wiped them away with my fingers.


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War games.

The image of those two Iraqi children with their hands in the air.

'So.'

The word came at me across the room like a hand grenade. It startled me.

'What does "so" mean?'

'What do you have to say? You have retreated into silence. You have to say something.'

I considered for a moment.

'There's not much I can say, is there? You seem to have this all thought out. I have been taken by surprise. I was in no way prepared for this. You have your mind made up. A fait accompli. "So" is not helpful. No. I presume you want me to pat you on the head and say run along darling, I'm sorry this hasn't worked out. I hope you enjoy the rest of your life.'

He stood there quite still, a slightly amused smile on his face.

'Fuck you. How's that for something to say?'

'Thanks.'

I picked up my mug of coffee and threw it at him.

It was a palpable hit: one grey suit temporarily ruined; one white shirt streaked with brown; one tie a goner; one face startled and then reproachful. Put your hands in the air, bastard.

'Sally . . .' he said. I leant across the table and picked up his mug and hurled it at him also. He was rooted to the ground. I got him on the shoulder.

More sartorial damage.

I put my head on the table and began to cry.

'This is a totally ridiculous way to behave,' he yelled at me. 'Have you lost your mind? This is my new suit.'

As if I cared.

'Look at it. Just bloody look at it.'


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He took off the jacket and waved it round. Drops scattered everywhere. I wondered if the Figgises next door could hear him shouting through the wall. It would, I thought, be a nice change for them.

'And my shirt.'

He tore off his tie and flung it on the ground. Seventy pounds. Italian silk. Fit for nothing.

'Bastard,' I yelled at him.

'I am going up to change and when I come down, I hope you will have collected your wits.'

I looked over at him standing there by the glass door with his dripping coat in his hand. How absurd we are, I thought. I wiped my face with my fingers and then scrabbled in my pockets for some Kleenex.

'And while you're up there, pack.'

'Pack?'

I blew my nose. 'If you're leaving, you have to pack.'

'I wasn't intending to leave tonight.'

'And please take your dirty washing with you.'

'I wasn't . . .'

'When then? When were you intending . . .?'

'Well . . . in a few days . . . I have to . . .'

'Tonight.'

I waved my hand towards the door. 'Go and pack.'

'I can't possibly . . .'

I looked ostentatiously at my watch. 'You have all night. It is almost nine now. You usually leave for work at eight thirty. That gives you . . .'

'Sally. Be reasonable.'

'Sorry, what was that word you used?'

'Oh for Christ's sake, I hate it when you behave like this. Come on, let's sit down and talk this through.'


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I left the room. I couldn't bear looking at him another moment. His silk vest was stained with coffee also. Even in the summer he wore silk vests; his mother, he had told me, had cajoled him into the habit while he was still at school. 'They help you to keep an even body temperature,' she had told him. 'Like a second skin.' Pah! I got the dustpan and brush and a little blue cloth and went back into the kitchen. He was still standing in the same place.

'Still here?' I asked. 'Wasting good packing time.'

I knelt down and began to pick up the pieces of the mugs scattered on the floor.

' "Yellow and black and pale and hectic red, pestilence-stricken multitudes," ' I muttered as I swept the shards into the pan.

'Look, Sally, tomorrow . . .' His voice was conciliating.

'Tonight. Unless of course you are merely winding me up. Hunh?'

'No, I'm not.'

'Then tonight. You want to leave. You leave. Take all your stuff with you when you go. I will be changing the locks tomorrow, so don't feel you can keep coming back whenever you feel like it. This is my house, Charlie, and I don't want you in it any longer.'

'There are things to discuss.'

'Not much.'

I was rubbing at the coffee on the floor with the blue cloth. He moved towards the door, stepping warily round me as though he thought I might attack him if he took his eye off me. As he reached the door he stopped.

'I'll arrange things tomorrow. I'll move out tomorrow. After all where can I go at this time of night.'

'Mummy.'

'Sally . . .'

'Or . . .'

I let the word hang on the air between us. An acrobat of a word on a high wire. He frowned and looked down at his shoes, pale beige slip-ons, splattered with coffee.

'I don't know what you mean by that.'

'I mean I'm not as green as I'm cabbage-looking.'


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I rubbed at the floor.

'There are cardboard boxes in the garage, if you need them.'

He turned without a word and left the room.

I sat back on my heels and listened as he ran up the stairs and along the passage. The loo door slammed and I heard the lock click. After a moment or two he flushed water and the pipes rattled; the pipes always rattled when you flushed the loo, no plumber had ever been able to sort that out. I heard the quiet urgency of his voice speaking on his mobile. I got up from the floor and went over and switched on the radio. Solemn voices were discussing the war. It seemed to me that someone had always been discussing a war, the possibility of a war, the ending of a war, the aftermath of a war. I twiddled the knob; voices, music scuttled past my ears, static jumbled sound scraped at the inside of my head. Then someone playing a lonely saxophone, with a little riff of a drum in the background. That was me all right. Yeah.

Outside the orange had faded from the sky and upstairs Charlie, having finished talking to her, was opening drawers, throwing cases from the top of the press down onto the bed, his pale slip-ons shuffling on the floor as he moved. No doubt he was feeling sorry for himself.

Hard done by.

No doubt at all.

End of a marriage.

An era.

I've lost the only playboy of the western world.

Bugger you Pegeen Mike.

The sax held a long sobbing note.

A child next door cried.

I sat down on the sofa and let my head fall back into the cushions.

I must have sat there for about an hour, my mind quite blank and dark. The jazz had long faded and someone was singing 'Un Bel Di' when Charlie came into the room. I struggled to focus my mind. The only thing I could think was, thank God nobody's talking about war.

'Un Bel Di' is better than that . . . not much, mind you.

Charlie walked across the room and switched off the radio.


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'That's the most of it,' he said.

He unplugged the radio and stood with it in his hand looking down at me. 'I'll be back tomorrow for the bits and pieces.'

'You won't get in tomorrow.'


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