



Charred black crumbs from her breakfast dotted the plate, the margarine and the plastic tablecloth. Eudora ate less and less each day. By the time she finished one mouthful, the toast was cold. She was cold.

Like everything else heat too seemed to run out as she got older. She felt she was ageing too fast. Her hair, which she wore in a tight knot at the back of her head, had become brittle and white and her skin was subsiding; only the tops of her cheeks had retained some kind of shape.

When she used to do the groceries, she remembered, it was always butter — pure yellow butter — never margarine. But now Nina, her niece, did all the shopping and preferred substitutes.

‘I’ll be going out soon. Want anything?’ Nina called out from the kitchen.

‘Is it Saturday already?’

‘Yes. What did you think?’

‘Butter,’ Eudora said. There was no response. ‘Butter.’

Nina put her head through the hatch. ‘Aunty, you know it’s bad for you.’

How little the young knew, Eudora thought. She held her plate to the edge of the table and brushed the crumbs onto it with her hand. The plastic felt cold, mockingly indestructible. In the old days people’s things aged with them, but now people aged while things remained infantile. ‘Bring me another record then. That Monteverdi opera...’

‘I’ll try the library later.’

Eudora had been in her flat for nearly twenty years. In the last few months her arthritis had become more severe; she hardly ever went out. London was a patch of sky framed in a grimy Edwardian window. Only after Nina left for the shops did Eudora remember she had also

wanted some dates. She had a hankering, but it was too late. Time heals, she said to herself.

Later, in the afternoon, the doorbell rang. She heard Nina open the door. 'There's someone to see you.'

'Who? Is it Sandra from the council?'

A big tall man appeared in the doorway. He wore a dark suit and carried a raincoat. 'No, it's me.' His voice was muffled, as if from another world.

Eudora peered forward. His face was in shadow. 'I can't see you. Come in.'

He stepped into the room. He had a broad angular face, a firm wide jaw and silver hair slicked back; his brown skin had been scrubbed and shaved. Eudora stared.

'Is it really... you?' She pulled at her cardigan. Her shoulders felt bunched. 'How did you find me?'

'I wanted to.'

'After fifty years?'

He looked down at the worn-out carpet. 'I got you some flowers.' He brought out a bunch of deep, maroon roses from behind his back.

She shook her head. 'Only you would... Otis.'

He put the roses on the table. 'I would have called before coming, but I didn't know the number. I met Priya yesterday, he had only your address.'

Eudora watched his thin, dark lips move. She felt she was dreaming. 'What are you doing in London?'

'Seeing you.' He pulled his mouth into a slight smile.

Eudora shook her head again. 'How little you've changed.'

In fifty years he'd put on a stone, stretched his skin, thinned his hair, but so much was just the same. The deep-set worried eyes. The head held slightly at an angle, as if permanently fixing his violin.

'Some whisky?'

'No, No. It's too early.'

'Tea then? I'll get some.' Eudora craned her neck as if to reach above him into the kitchen. 'Nina! Can you...'

'She's gone. She said she was going out.'

'Again? She was out all morning. I thought she had to be studying today.' Eudora heaved herself to her feet. 'You see I have changed. I'm twice my size. You'd never have recognized me would you?' She wished she'd worn her black trousers instead of the long ridiculous green skirt she had on. Her carpet slippers were falling apart.

'I'd have known even if you were on the other side of the street.' He spoke softly, staring at her.

Eudora made a crackly laughing noise. 'You joke but I can't even smile. I'd look like an idiot.' The folds around her mouth flapped. 'Come and sit down. I'll get the tea.' She shuffled to the door.

'Let me help you.' He dropped his coat on a chair and followed her into the kitchen.

'This is my kitchen but now I can find nothing. Nina... the young want the whole world their way. They think it'll make a difference. Do you remember when we were young? Were we like that too?' She looked back over her shoulder at him.

'I remember.'

'Do you take sugar?'

He shook his head. 'No.'

'Good. We don't have any sugar. No sugar. No butter. You see I still think it's worth trying to keep in trim.' Her laugh was drowned by the sound of the kettle.

'I came last week. I was looking everywhere for you.' He ran his finger along the edge of an empty whisky tumbler until it hummed.

'London?'

'Yes.'

Eudora said nothing for a while. She lowered her head and sucked in some air. 'And where have you been? All these years.'

'All over. It's been a long time.' He watched her arrange the teapot, cups and saucers on a tray.

'Don't I know. It's a longer life than I expected.' Her voice was bitter. She tried to brighten up. 'You've done well though. Your music. I heard you went to America with your fiddle.'

'Yes, for some years. Also back home, to Colombo.'

'Yes, you must have done well.' Eudora tilted her head and studied him. 'Such fine clothes too. You look so well.'

'But I haven't got what I really wanted.'

'I was young. So foolish.'

'You disappeared. They said you'd gone with Alu.'

'How could you believe that? Alu was such an ass.'

'I was wrong. I know. I made a mistake.'

The air thickened between them. 'You never wrote,' she said eventually and filled the teapot.

'I looked for you again and again. It was impossible.' He took the tray from her and led the way back into the sitting room.

The first time they had met was at a hotel in Colombo. Eudora was on the terrace with a cousin. She sat facing the sea. The ocean seemed to swell and rise to the sound of a violin playing inside. She was nineteen. A slim girl with a small bright face. While she and her companion were still sipping lemonade the violinist finished his rehearsal and came out. He walked past them to the parapet wall overlooking the beach. When he turned he caught her eye. She'd never seen anyone quite like him before. He was big and gaunt and his thick hair was in a tangle. He was dressed in a baggy suit with a loose red tie pulled away from his throat. He seemed to drink in the sea air.

They didn't speak that day, but it was not long before they did.

'I still remember the first words you said to me.' Eudora sank back in her chair. 'Do you?'

'I wish I could.'

'You asked me whether I believed in the soul.'

'You said, yes?'

'Yes, I said yes, but I didn't even know what you were talking about. I said yes because you wanted me to.'

'And now? Do you believe in the soul now?'

'I don't know.'

'Why are we here then?' Otis asked almost in a whisper.

'Milk? I'm sorry there's no cake.' She poured the tea and added some milk before handing him the cup.

He stared at her swollen hands. Behind her was a bookcase. He saw several books he had given her. He nodded at them. 'You've kept the books?'

'I can't read. My eyes are cloudy. Cataracts. I can only just manage television.'

She thought he was the man for her, but her father didn't approve. He said Otis had no future. He didn't do anything, just fiddled. 'But I love him. He makes me feel happy.' Her father said she'd been reading too many novels. She had cried, furious first at him then at herself.

Otis looked hard at her. 'I never thought I'd lose you like that. You said you loved me, then disappeared like a...'

She didn't look up. Too much had happened, and yet now it was almost as if nothing had happened. A room, some books, a couple of chairs and the two of them. She desperately wanted to speak but could find no words, even after fifty years.

'Can't you tell me? What happened? After all we had said. It was so perfect.'

'Was it? Were you really happy?'

'I was happier than I've ever been since. I felt something. It's never happened again.'

‘Not even with your music?’

‘That’s not happiness. Not like those days. Didn’t you feel it? I thought it was like nothing on earth.’

‘You were so preoccupied. You didn’t want me.’

‘But I did. More than anything. I just didn’t know what to do. And then you disappeared. They said you went with that...’

‘I had to go away.’

Otis’s face dropped. ‘Did you love him?’

‘No. He was just after me. I had no interest. I only loved you. There’s been nobody else. Never. It’s just that you didn’t do anything. Eventually I came to England. Here to London.’

‘I had no hope.’

Eudora shrugged. ‘And now? What did you expect? I waited for twenty years. But there wasn’t even a postcard. I gave up. That’s what happened to me.’

‘I came in a car, a friend’s car, to collect you that day. I was so excited I was bouncing in the car. I was going to tell the whole world about us. I had a ring, flowers, everything, but you’d gone.’ His voice deepened from perplexity to indictment. ‘You left no message. It could have been just a dream, except it was unforgettable.’

‘I thought you wanted some time on your own.’ Eudora touched the skin under her lips. It was a gesture from the past: the seaside terrace where they had first met. ‘It’s not been easy, this life. I’ve barely survived in this place. I can’t much longer. Now you appear again...’

‘You are not surprised?’

‘No. I knew we’d meet again. At least once more in this life, even if only for a...’

‘You wanted to meet again?’

‘I wanted to. But I gave up any hope of a life together.’ She paused. ‘You remember our old house? Those lovely high ceilings. The space. The light. The silver.’

‘Yes. Exquisite. I had never seen a house like it. I’d never been so uncomfortable, waiting for you on the steps under your father’s eye.’

‘He’d never have imagined this would ever happen. You and me, meeting again in this dark cold flat. When I first came to London it was different. People here were different. They had respect. Now... maybe its me. I’ve got old and slow and in the way. I had to do too much for nothing. A whole life spent just surviving a rush. All that’s happened is I’ve lost everything. Even my teeth, the black hair I used to have.’ She looked sideways at Otis and added ‘The looks you liked, once.’

Otis laughed ‘You act as if it’s all over.’

‘It is.’ The chair creaked as she moved to pull at her cardigan again. ‘Have some more tea?’

Otis shook his head. 'No.'

'Is it cold? Everything gets so cold in here.'

'No. It's not cold.'

Eudora shut her eyes and drew a long breath. 'I want to be young again.' When she opened her eyes she tried to focus on him. The skin tightened on her face. 'Why didn't you marry me?' she said suddenly. 'Why didn't you marry me and give me children and all that. We could have had a life...'

'You can't go back, it's impossible. But I'm here now.'

The door behind him opened and Nina peered in. 'Sorry, folks. I didn't realize you were still chatting.'

'You went out again, girl?'

'Yes. I was meeting someone at the library, Aunty. I told you.'

'That disco boy?'

'He's a DJ, Aunty. Anyway I got you your Monteverdi. You want me to put it on?'

'I've got to go now.' Otis adjusted his jacket, smoothing a lapel. Then he turned to Eudora. 'Listen, can I take you out tomorrow? To dinner?'

She pulled her head back, startled. 'Go out?'

'Yes. I'd like us to go out.'

'Don't be silly!'

'No I'm serious. It wouldn't be the first time.'

Nina clapped her hands and urged Eudora. 'Go on. You can't turn down an invitation like that. Go on, say yes.'

Eudora couldn't remember the last occasion she'd been out to dinner, just for two. Inside her a smile opened like it did fifty years ago. It might have been that long ago.

'What time?'

'So you'll come. Good. I'll book a table.' Otis grinned at Nina. 'Is there a restaurant you can recommend around here?'

'There's a new place, Golden something on the Broadway. They say it's good. Indian.'

'Fine. What do you say?'

Eudora nodded. The smile had reached her face.

Otis reached over and touched her hand. 'I'll see you here at seven-thirty then. I must go now.'

'Do you have to?'

Otis didn't reply.

'I'm sorry. You must have to... It's just tomorrow is a long way off. So much can happen.'

'I'll be back. I promise.' He picked up his coat and left.

The next day she spent all morning looking for the sari she wanted: her maroon silk. She found it in a suitcase under her bed. In the afternoon, after ironing it, she rested and gazed at his flowers. It took her hours to get dressed and to tie her hair. Nina said she looked wonderful.

‘Don’t be silly child.’ Eudora said, embarrassed for the first time in years.

At exactly seven-thirty she heard a car draw up. She watched him from her window and opened the front door as soon as he rang the bell.

‘How lovely you look.’ He led her down to the taxi.

‘I can’t believe it,’ she said as they headed for the Broadway.

At the restaurant she felt out of this world. They were seated in a cove from which she could observe the rest of the dining room. ‘I really wish I could see properly,’ she said. ‘All these people!’

‘Once you have your operation you’ll see everything.’

‘If only...’

Otis ordered the meal. ‘Chicken jalfrezi? Tandoori?’ She nodded blindly.

The waiter smiled. ‘Drink sir? For madam?’

Otis ordered two whiskies and a soda.

When the waiter disappeared Eudora said, ‘I must be older than his grandmother. Everyone is so young here.’

‘So are we.’

‘The first time, yes, we were. Not now...’

Otis shook his head. ‘We are still young in what we have...’

‘We can’t go back. Yesterday you said we can’t go back.’

‘No, not go back, continue. There was just... an interruption.’

‘It’s impossible.’

‘Yesterday you would have said today, this evening, spending it here like this, was not possible. But we are here.’

Eudora looked around her. ‘No. This is the interruption in my life.’ She swirled the whisky around in her glass.

‘Don’t say that. Let’s take what we’ve been offered.’

Eudora shivered. The waiter brought the food. ‘Madam is cold?’

‘No, no. It’s nothing.’

He carefully placed the dishes on the table. ‘Please, enjoy.’

Otis and Eudora nodded together like a married couple at their golden anniversary. After the waiter left they looked at each other silently. Eudora was the first to move. ‘Salt? You used to take so much.’

He smiled. ‘I’ve cut down.’

They began to eat slowly.

‘This is wonderful. It’s what I’ve been waiting so long for.’

'It's only the beginning.'

'We have no time. It can't last. You can see the end.'

Otis's shoulders seemed to grow larger. 'It's always like that. Think back. Even on the first day, didn't it feel the same? Too good to last. We didn't know life would be so long. If I'd found you that day, even then we may have had only another day. Or one year? Maybe ten? It might have been over by now. We could have more from today.'

'You couldn't stay here.'

'Yesterday you said so much could happen before this evening. There is so much ahead of us.'

Eudora was trying to see him, the room had become darker. She shivered again. 'I don't know if I could bear it... Afterwards to be alone again. I couldn't bear it. Inside I couldn't.'

'You'd never have to bear it, not for long. I would somehow find you.'

'It's taken you a lifetime.'

'No. Only time.'

'It's been an awful long time. My life has gone. There was nothing left to lose. Now you want more pain. More loss.'

'Never again.'

'How can you be so sure? You never had to sacrifice...' Her eyes hurt. 'You had your music.'

'I know. It's not fair... but I would. Anything.'

'Could you? Lose it all?'

'We have only ourselves now.'

'When you look at me like that I feel everything I've lost.'

Otis looked down quietly tidying his plate. 'I won't look then, not until you want me to.'

'Is that a promise?'

When they finished eating Otis paid the bill. They went outside. It was raining. They climbed into a waiting black cab. Otis mumbled the address and the car shot off down the wet road.

Eudora could smell flowers, burnt toast; she heard her Monteverdi. The opening horns of Orfeo. She wanted to say that the car was going too fast, but Otis held her hand tight and she could feel his eyes turn towards her in the dark.

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