

'She's getting married to that bastard,' he thought, determined to act nonchalantly when Tanya got round to telling him.

In the kitchen, while she unpacked the shopping, he switched on the fan heater and filled the kettle.

She took off her coat to reveal an orange velvet caftan that she wore over a black polo neck sweater. "Come back to the theatre, Nick. We miss you."

He lit the gas. "No one's indispensable and I've - "

"You are." She sliced the fruit cake into thick slabs. "You're a fantastic director. We advertised, but no one we've interviewed has been any good. If it'll make any difference, we'll get rid of Sally. Actresses are easily replaced."

"No, Tanya. If she no longer loves me, it's my bad luck, not hers."

"You're too honourable, Nick," she said, pouring milk into the cups.

"Okay, stop fandangoing around. Tell me about Sally." Seeing her reluctance, he said, "I suppose she's getting married."

She shook her head. "The opposite. She knows she made a terrible mistake."

He couldn't hide his surprise.

Tanya put down the milk bottle. "She wants you back. Would you have her?"

Thoughts of Australia receded. He pictured Sally erasing the

loneliness of this house. "We'd have to talk. I wouldn't start where we left off. I'd have to make sure I could trust her again. Fidelity's important to me. Getting engaged is a serious commitment." He felt a ripple of optimism. "But, if it did work out and we got married, I'd come back to the theatre."

"I thought you'd say that," she said, looking uncomfortable. "Hell and buckets of blood. Now I'm going to have to tell you. She asked me not to, but you've got to know. She had an abortion."

Horrified, he stared at her. "Was it mine?"

"She didn't know if it was yours or his." She went to him and touched his arm. "Sorry, Nick."

"God." He felt chilled. "Are you sure she had an abortion?"

"Yes. She asked my advice – "

He pushed her hand away.

"Stop looking at me like that. I begged her not to. Nick, I'm sorry."

Roughly pulling out a chair, he sat down. "Do you want to come and live here for a year? I'm going away and I'll need someone to look after the house."

"What? I couldn't afford to rent this place."

"I don't want any rent. You'd be doing me a favour."

"Where are you going?"

"Australia. Harriet's got a theatre company with schools in Melbourne."

"When did you decide this?"

"About thirty seconds ago."

"I know you're upset, but it's a bit drastic isn't it?"

"It's not that sudden. When Sally and I broke our engagement I wrote and asked her if I could have a job."

"Doing what?"

He shrugged. "Anything. I haven't heard from her yet."

Tanya wrinkled her nose. "My cousin's just come back from Australia. He said Melbourne's fifty years behind the times. You'll hate it. *Hair's* banned."

"I'll shave my head then."

She slapped his arm. "The rock opera, you idiot."

"I know. Why's it banned?"

"The nude scene I suppose."

He shrugged. "I've got to get away. Nothing's certain yet. Harriet might not offer me anything, but will you come and live here if she does?"

She smiled. "I'd be crazy to refuse. This kitchen's bigger than my bedsit. What will you do if she doesn't?"

"I don't know yet. I might start my own theatre company."

"Can I have a job?"

"Of course."

When Tanya left he rummaged through his suitcases, throwing things on the floor in his haste to find the photos of Sally. Taking

them into the drawing room, he threw them on the fire. Unable to watch them burn, he took a book of Chopin Preludes from the bookcase and went to the piano. His hands were so cold his fingers lacked dexterity, but he played well. 'It must be my tormented mind,' he thought as he closed the lid.

The stereo he had bought his grandmother for her last birthday was in the alcove near the window. He lifted the lid and saw an old 78 record on the turntable. It was one of Harriet's. Turning out the light, he opened the green velvet curtains and stood by the window scarcely aware of the crackles as the stylus cut into the grooves. Harriet's soprano voice filled the room, its brilliance preserved for over forty years by early recording technology. The melancholy song from Handel's *Semele* suited his mood. Pressing his finger to the glass, he watched a fragment of ice turn to water and slip down the window.

When the song ended he put on a Rolling Stones LP and sat in the armchair by the fire gazing at the flames. Nothing could distract his mind from Sally and the abortion. Thoughts that the baby might have been his tormented him. Banging his hands on the arm of the chair, he stood up and looked at Harriet's portrait. It had been painted when she was twenty-six, the same age as he was now. The artist had captured an expression that was a mix of humour, dreaminess and determination. Rage and grief had resurrected his desire to know if she really was his grandmother. They had the

same striking good looks with high cheek-bones, straight noses and wavy hair that was almost black. Fashionably long, his fell past his ears. In all the photos round the house, Harriet's hairstyle depended on what role she was playing. His brown eyes were the same almond shape as her grey ones.

Desperate to do something constructive, he found his pen and sat on the sofa making notes about a new theatre company. 'It's got to be revolutionary. Modernize Shakespeare? Update the language?' He thought about the party scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. 'Have Beatles and Stones music playing on the stereo? Have people doing the twist?' Stimulated by the idea, he lit a cigarette. As he leaned over to pick up the ashtray from the floor, his lighter fell down the side of the sofa. He slid his hand down to retrieve it, but could not feel anything. He stood up and lifted the green velvet cushion. The upholstery was torn and he poked his hand through the opening, but the lighter was not there. Kneeling on the floor, he looked under the sofa. As well as the lighter, he saw a sheet of paper.

Immediately, he recognized his grandmother's writing . . .

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