

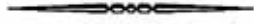
the sweetest dream

DORIS LESSING

A NOVEL

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THE  
SWEETEST  
DREAM



DORIS LESSING

 HarperCollins e-books

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With gratitude to my editor at Flamingo, Philip Gwyn Jones, and to my agent Jonathan Clowes, for good advice and criticism, and to Antony Chennells, for help with the Roman Catholic parts of the book.

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## *Author's Note*

I am not writing volume three of my autobiography because of possible hurt to vulnerable people. Which does not mean I have novelised autobiography. There are no parallels here to actual people except for one, a very minor character. I hope I have managed to recapture the spirit of, particularly the Sixties, that contradictory time which, looking back and comparing it with what came later, seems surprisingly innocent. There was little of the nastiness of the Seventies, or the cold greed of the Eighties.

Some events described as taking place at the end of the Seventies and early Eighties in fact happened later, by a decade. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament took a stand against the government doing anything at all to protect the population against the results of nuclear attack—accident, even fall-out, though surely protection of its citizens should be any government's first responsibility. People who believed that the population should be protected were treated as if they were enemies, attacked with verbal abuse, *fascists* being the least of it, and sometimes physically. Death threats . . . unpleasant substances pushed through letterboxes—the whole gamut of mob abuse. There has never been a more hysterical, noisy and irrational campaign. Students of the dynamics of mass movements will find it all in the newspaper archives, and I have had letters from them on the lines of, 'But that was crazy. Just what was it all about?'

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*‘And people leave who were warm children.’*

## Begin Reading

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AN EARLY EVENING in autumn, and the street below was a scene of small yellow lights that suggested intimacy, and people already bundled up for winter. Behind her the room was filling with a child's dark, but nothing could dismay her: she was floating, as high as a summer cloud, as happy as a child who had just learned to walk. The reason for this uncharacteristic lightness of heart was a telegram from her former husband, Johnny Lennox—Comrade Johnny—three days ago. SIGNED CONTRACT FOR FIDELITY TO ALL ARREARS AND CURRENT PAYMENT TO YOU SUNDAY . Today was Sunday. The 'all arrears' had been due, she knew, to something like the fever of elation she was feeling now: there was no question of his paying 'all' which by now must amount to so much money she no longer bothered to keep an account. But he surely must be expecting a really big sum to sound so confident. Here a little breeze—apprehension?—did reach her. Confidence was his—no, she must *not* say stock-in-trade, even if she had often in her life felt that, but could she remember him ever being outfaced by circumstances, even discomfited?

On a desk behind her two letters lay side by side, like a lesson in life's improbable but so frequent dramatic juxtapositions. One offered her a part in a play. Frances Lennox was a minor, steady, reliable actress, and had never been asked for anything more. This part was in a brilliant new play, a two-hander, and the male part would be taken by Tony Wilde who until now had seemed so far above her she would never have had the ambition to think of her name and his side by side on a poster. And *he* had asked for her to be offered the part. Two years ago they had been in the same play, she as usual in a serviceable smaller role. At the end of a short run—the play had not been a success—she had heard on the closing night as they tripped back and forth taking curtain calls, 'Well done, that was very good.' Smiles from Olympus, she had thought that, while knowing he had shown signs of being interested in her. But now she had been watching herself burst into all kinds of feverish dreams, not exactly taking herself by surprise, since she knew only too well how battened down she was, how well under control was her erotic self, but she could not prevent herself imagining her talent for fun (she supposed she still had it?) even for reckless enjoyment, being given room, while at the same time showing what she could do on the stage, if given a chance. But she would not be earning much money in a small theatre, with a play that was a gamble. Without that telegram from Johnny she could not have afforded to say yes.

The other letter offered her a niche as Agony Aunt (name still to be chosen) on *The Defender*, well paid, and safe. This would be a continuation of the other strand of her professional life as freelance journalist, which is where she earned money.

She had been writing on all kinds of subjects for years. At first she had tried her wings in local papers and broadsheets, any place that would pay her a little money. Then she found she was doing

research for serious articles, and they were in the national newspapers. She had a name for solid balanced articles that often shone an unexpected and original light on a current scene.

She would do it well. What else had her experience fitted her for, if not to cast a cool eye on the problems of others? But saying yes to that work would have no pleasure in it, no feeling she would be trying new wings. Rather, she would have to steady her shoulders with the inner stiffening of resolve that is like a suppressed yawn.

How weary she was of all the problems, the bruised souls, the waifs and strays, how delightful it would be to say, 'Right, you can look after yourselves for a bit, I am going to be in the theatre every evening and most of the day too.' (Here was another little cold nudge: have you taken leave of your senses? Yes, and she was loving every minute.)

The top of a tree still in its summer leaf, but a bit ragged now, was glistening: light from two storeys up, from the old woman's rooms, had snatched it from dark into lively movement, almost green: colour was implied. Julia was in, then. Readmitting her mother-in-law—her ex-mother-in-law—to her mind brought a familiar apprehension, because of the weight of disapproval sifting down through the house to reach her, but there was something else she had only recently become aware of. Julia had had to go to hospital, could have died, and Frances had to acknowledge at last how much she relied on her. Suppose there was no Julia, what would she do, what would they all do?

Meanwhile, everyone referred to her as *the old woman*, she too until recently. Not Andrew though. And she had noticed that Colin had begun to call her Julia. The three rooms above hers, over where she stood now, below Julia's, were inhabited by Andrew the elder son, and Colin the younger, her and Johnny Lennox's sons.

She had three rooms, bedroom and study and another, always needed for someone staying the night, and she had heard Rose Trimble say, 'What does she need three rooms for, she's just selfish.'

No one said, Why does Julia need four rooms? The house was hers. This rackety over-full house with people coming and going, sleeping on floors, bringing friends whose names she often did not know, had at its top an alien zone, which was all order, where the air seemed gently mauve, scented with violets, with cupboards holding decades-old hats that had veils and rhinestones and flowers, and suits of a cut and material not to be bought anywhere now. Julia Lennox descended the stairs, walked down the street, her back straight, her hands in gloves—there were drawers of them—wore perfect shoes, hat and coats, in violet or grey or mauve, and around her was an aura of flower essences. 'Where does she get those clothes?' Rose had demanded before she had taken in that truth from the past, that clothes could be kept for years, and not discarded a week after buying them.

Below Frances's slice of the house was a sitting-room that went from back to front of the house and there, usually on a huge red sofa, took place the intense confidences of teenagers, two by two; or when she opened the door cautiously, she might see on it anything up to half a dozen of 'the kids', cuddled together like a litter of puppies.

The room was not used enough to justify taking such a big slice out of the centre of the house. The life of the house went on in the kitchen. Only if there was a party did this room come into its own.



but parties were few because the youngsters went to discos and pop concerts; though it seemed hard for them to tear themselves away from the kitchen, and from a very large table that Julia had once used, one leaf folded down, for dinner parties when she had 'entertained'. As she put it.

Now the table was always at full stretch with sometimes sixteen or twenty chairs and stools around it.

The basement flat was large and often Frances did not know who was camping out there. Sleeping bags and duvets littered the floor like detritus after a storm. She felt like a spy going down there. Apart from insisting they kept it clean and tidy—they were taken by occasional fits of 'tidying up', which it was hard to see made much difference—she did not interfere. Julia had no such inhibition and would descend the little stairs and stand surveying the scene of sleepers, sometimes still in the beds at midday or later, the dirty cups on the floors, the piles of records, the radios, clothes lying about in tangles, and then turn herself around slowly, a severe figure in spite of the little veils and gloves that might have a rose pinned at a wrist, and, having seen from the rigidity of a back, or a nervously raised head that her presence had been noted, she would go slowly up the stairs, leaving behind her on the stale air the odours of flowers and expensive face powder.

Frances leaned out of the window to see if light was spilling down the steps from the kitchen. Yes, they were all there then, and waiting for supper. Who, tonight? She would soon find out. At that moment Johnny's little Beetle appeared from around the corner, parked itself neatly, and out stepped Johnny. And, at once, three days of foolish dreams dissolved, while she thought, I've been mad, I've been crazy. What made me imagine anything was going to change? If there was in fact a film, there wouldn't be any money for her and the boys, as usual . . . but he had *said* the contract was signed?

In the time it took her to walk slowly, stopping at the desk to look at the two fateful letters, reaching the door, still taking her time, beginning to descend the stairs, it was as if the last three days had not happened. She was not going to be in the play, not enjoy the dangerous intimacy of the theatre with Tony Wilde, and she was pretty sure that tomorrow she would write to *The Defender* and accept their job.

Slowly, collecting herself, down the stairs, and then, smiling, she stood in the open door of the kitchen. Against the window, standing with his arms spread to take his weight on the sill, stood Johnny, all bravado and—though he was not aware of that—apology. Around the table sat an assortment of youngsters, and Andrew and Colin were both there. All were looking towards Johnny, who had been holding forth about something, and all admiringly, except for his sons. They smiled, like the others, but the smiles were anxious. They, like herself, knew that the money promised for today had vanished into the land of dreams. (Why on earth had she told them? Surely she knew better!) It had happened before. And they knew, like her, that he had come here now, when the kitchen would be full of young people, so he could not be greeted by rage, tears, reproaches—but that was the past, long ago.

Johnny spread out his arms, palms towards her, smiling painfully, and said, 'The film's off . . . the CIA . . .' At her look he desisted, and was silent, looking nervously at his two boys.

'Don't bother,' said Frances. 'I really didn't expect anything else.' At which the boys turned the

eyes to her; their concern for her made her even more self-reproachful.

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She stood by the oven where various dishes were shortly to reach their moments of truth. Johnny, as if her back absolved him, began an old speech about the CIA whose machinations this time had been responsible for the film falling through.

Colin, needing some sort of anchor of fact, interrupted to ask, 'But, Dad, I thought the contract . . .'

Johnny said quickly, 'Too many hassles. You wouldn't understand . . . what the CIA wants, the CIA gets.'

A cautious glance over her shoulder showed Colin's face a knot of anger, bewilderment, resentment. Andrew, as always, seemed insouciant, even amused, though she knew how very far he was from that. This scene or something like it had been repeated throughout their childhoods.

• • •

In the year the war began, 1939, two youngsters, hopeful and ignorant—like those around the table tonight—had fallen in love, like millions of others in the warring countries, and put their arms around each other for comfort in the cruel world. But there was excitement in it too, war's most dangerous symptom. Johnny Lennox introduced her to the Young Communist League just as he was leaving it to be a grown-up, if not yet a soldier. He was a bit of a star, Comrade Johnny, and needed her to know it. She had sat in the back rows of crowded halls to hear him explain that it was an imperialist war, and the progressive and democratic forces should boycott it. Soon, however, he was in uniform and in the same halls, to the same audiences, exhorting them to do their bit, for now it was a war against fascism because the attack by the Germans on the Soviet Union had made it so. There were barrackers and protesters, as well as the faithful; there were boos and loud raucous laughter. Johnny was mocked for standing up there tranquilly explaining the new Party Line just as if he had not been saying the exact opposite until recently. Frances was impressed by his calm; accepting—even provoking—hostility by his pose, arms out, palms forward, suffering for the hard necessities of the times. He was in the RAF uniform. He had wanted to be a pilot, but his eyes were not up to it, so he was a corporal, having refused on ideological grounds to be an officer. He would be in administration.

So that had been Frances's introduction to politics, or rather, to Johnny's politics. Something of an achievement, perhaps, to be young in the late Thirties and to care nothing about politics, but so it was. She was a solicitor's daughter from Kent. The theatre had been her window into glamour and adventure, the great world, first in school plays, then in amateur dramatics. She had always played leading roles, but was typecast for her English-rose looks. But now she was in uniform too, one of the young women attached to the War Ministry, mostly driving senior officers around. Attractive young women in uniform in her kind of job had a good time, though this aspect of war tends to be played down from tact, and perhaps even shame, towards the dead. She danced a good deal, she dined, she mildly lost her heart to glamorous Frenchmen, Poles, Americans, but did not forget Johnny, or the anguished passionate nights of love and that rehearsed their later longing for each other.

Meanwhile he was in Canada attending to the RAF fliers being trained there. By now he was a

officer, and doing well, as his letters made clear; then he came home, an aide to some bigwig, and he was a captain. He was so handsome in his uniform, and she so attractive in hers. In that week they married and Andrew was conceived, and that was the end of her good times, because she was in a room with a baby and was lonely, and frightened, because of the bombing. She had acquired a mother-in-law, the fearsome Julia, who, looking like a society lady in a nineteen-thirties fashion magazine, descended from her house in Hampstead—this house—to show shock at what Frances was living in, and to offer her space in her house. Frances refused. She may not have been political, but with every fibre she shared her generation's fervent desire for independence. When she left her home, it was for a furnished room. And now, having been reduced to little more than Johnny's wife and a baby's mother, she was independent, and could define herself with that thought, holding on to it. Not much, but her own.

And the days and nights dragged by, and she was as far from the glamorous life she had been enjoying as if she had never left her parents' home in Kent. The last two years of the war were hard, poor, frightening. The food was bad. Bombs that seemed to have been designed to wreck people's nerves affected hers. Clothes were hard to find, and ugly. She had no friends, only met other mothers of small children. She was afraid above all that when Johnny came home he would be disappointed in her, an overweight tired young mother, nothing like the smart girl in uniform he had been madly in love with. And that is what happened.

Johnny had done well in the war, and had been noticed. No one could say he wasn't clever and quick, and his politics were unremarkable for that time. He was offered good jobs in the London reshaping itself after the war. He refused them. He wasn't going to be bought by the capitalist system, not by an iota had he changed his mind, his faith. Comrade Johnny Lennox, back in civvies, was preoccupied only by The Revolution.

Colin was born in 1945. Two small children, in a wretched flat in Notting Hill, then a run-down and poor part of London. Johnny was not often at home. He was working for the Party. By now it was necessary to explain that by the Party was meant the Communist Party, and what was meant to be heard was THE PARTY. When two strangers met it might go like this: 'Are you in the Party too?' 'Yes, of course.' 'I thought you must be.' Meaning: You are a good person, I like you, and so you must, like me, be in the Party.

Frances did not join the Party, though Johnny told her to. It was bad for him, he said, to have a wife who would not join.

'But who would know?' enquired Frances, adding to his contempt for her, because she had no feeling for politics and never would.

'The Party knows,' said Johnny.

'Too bad,' said Frances.

They were definitely not getting on, and the Party was the least of it, though a great irritation for Frances. They were living in real hardship, not to say squalor. He saw this as a sign of inner grace. Returning from a weekend seminar, 'Johnny Lennox on the Threat of American Aggression', he would

find her hanging up the children's clothes to dry on rickety arrangements of pulleys and racks screwed precariously to the wall outside the kitchen window, or returning, one child dragging on her hand, the other in a pushchair, from the park. The well of the chair would be full of groceries, and tucked behind the child was a book she had been hoping to read while the children played. 'You are a real working woman, Fran,' he would compliment her.

If he was delighted, his mother was not. When she came, always having written first, on this white paper you could cut yourself with, she sat with distaste on the edge of a chair which probably had residues of smeared biscuit or orange on it. She would announce, 'Johnny, this cannot go on.'

'And why not, Mutti?'

He called her Mutti because she hated it.

'Your grandchildren,' he would instruct her, 'will be a credit to the People's Britain.'

Frances would not let her eyes meet Julia's at such moments, because she was not going to be disloyal. She felt that her life, all of it, and herself in it, was dowdy, ugly, exhausting, and Johnny's nonsense was just a part of it. It would all end, she was sure of it. It would have to.

And it did, because Johnny announced that he had fallen in love with a real comrade, a Party member, and he was moving in with her.

'And how am I going to live?' asked Frances, already knowing what to expect.

'I'll pay maintenance, of course,' said Johnny, but never did.

She found a council nursery, and got a small job in a business making theatre sets and costumes. It was badly paid, but she managed. Julia arrived to complain that the children were being neglected and their clothes were a disgrace.

'Perhaps you should talk to your son?' said Frances. 'He owes me a year's maintenance.' Then it was two years, three years.

Julia asked whether if she got a decent allowance from the family would she give up her job and look after the boys?

Frances said no.

'But I wouldn't interfere with you,' said Julia. 'I promise you that.'

'You don't understand,' said Frances.

'No, I do not. And perhaps you would explain it to me?'

Johnny left Comrade Maureen and returned to her, Frances, saying that he had made a mistake. She took him back. She was lonely, knew the boys needed a father, was sex-starved.

He left again for another real, genuine comrade. When he again returned to Frances, she said to him: 'Out.'

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She was working full time in a theatre, earning not much but enough. The boys were by then ten and eight. There was trouble all the time at the schools, and they were not doing well.

'What do you expect?' said Julia.

'I never expect anything,' said Frances.

Then things changed, dramatically. Frances was amazed to hear that Comrade Johnny had agreed that Andrew should go to a good school. Julia said Eton, because her husband had gone there. Frances was waiting to hear that Johnny had refused Eton, and then was told that Johnny had been there, and had managed to conceal this damaging fact all these years. Julia did not mention it because his Eton career had hardly covered him or them with glory. He had gone for three years, but dropped out to go to the Spanish Civil War.

'You mean to say you are happy for Andrew to go to that school?' Frances said to him, on the telephone.

'Well, you at least get a good education,' said Johnny airily, and she could hear the unspoken. Look what it did for me.

So—Julia paying—Andrew took off from the poor rooms his mother and brother were living in, for Eton, and spent his holidays with schoolfriends, and became a polite stranger.

Frances went to an end-of-term at Eton, in an outfit bought to fit what she imagined would suit the occasion, and the first hat she had ever worn. She did all right, she thought, and could see Andrew was relieved when he saw her.

Then people came to ask after Julia, Philip's widow, and the daughter-in-law of Philip's father. An old man remembered him, as a small boy. It seemed the Lennoxes went to Eton as a matter of course. Johnny, or Jolyon, was enquired after. 'Interesting . . .' said a man who had been Johnny's teacher. 'An interesting choice of career.'

Thereafter Julia went to the formal occasions, where she was made much of, and was surprised at it: visiting Eton in those brief three years of Jolyon's attendance there, she had seen herself as Philip's wife, and of not much account.

Colin refused Eton, because of a deep, complicated loyalty to his mother whom he had watched struggling all these years. This did not mean he did not quarrel with her, fight her, argue, and did so badly at school Frances was secretly convinced he was doing it on purpose to hurt her. But he was cold and angry with his father, when Johnny did blow in to say that he was so terribly sorry, but he really did not have the money to give them. He agreed to go to a progressive school, St Joseph's, Julia paying for everything.

Johnny then came up with a suggestion that Frances at last did not refuse. Julia would let her and

the boys have the lower part of her house. She did not need all that room, it was ridiculous . . .

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Frances thought of Andrew, returning to various squalid addresses, or not returning, certainly never bringing friends home. She thought of Colin who made no secret of how much he hated how they were living. She said yes to Johnny, yes to Julia, and found herself in the great house that was Julia's and always would be.

Only she knew what it cost her. She had kept her independence all this time, paid for herself and the boys, and not accepted money from Julia, nor from her parents who would have been happy to help. Now here she was, and it was a final capitulation: what to other people was 'such a sensible arrangement' was defeat. She was no longer herself, she was an appendage of the Lennox family.

As far as Johnny was concerned, he had done as much as could be expected of him. When his mother told him he should support his sons, get a job that paid him a salary, he shouted at her that she was a typical member of an exploiting class, thinking only of money, while he was working for the future of the whole world. They quarrelled, frequently and noisily. Listening, Colin would go white as silent, and leave the house for hours or for days. Andrew preserved his airy, amused smile, his poison. He was often at home these days, and even brought friends.

Meanwhile Johnny and Frances had divorced because he had married properly, and formally with a wedding that the comrades attended, and Julia too. Her name was Phyllida, and she was not a comrade, but he said she was good material and he would make a communist of her.

• • •

This little history was the reason why Frances was keeping her back to the others, stirring a stew that didn't really need a stir. Delayed reaction: her knees trembled, her mouth seemed full of acid, for now her body was taking in the bad news, rather later than her mind. She was angry, she knew, and had the right to be, but she was angrier with herself than with Johnny. If she had allowed herself to spend three days inside a lunatic dream, fair enough—but how could she have involved the boys? Yet it was Andrew who had brought the telegram, waited until she showed it to him, and said, 'Frances, your errant husband is at last going to do the right thing.' He had sat lightly on the edge of a chair, a fairly attractive youth, looking more than ever like a bird just about to take off. He was tall and that made him seem even thinner, his jeans loose on long legs, and with long elegant bony hands lying palms up on his knees. He was smiling at her, and she knew it was meant kindly. They were trying hard to get on, but she was still nervous of him, because of those years of him rejecting her. He had said 'your husband', he had not said 'my father'. He was friendly with Johnny's new wife, Phyllida, who was reporting back that she was on the whole a bit of a drag.

He had congratulated her on her part in the new play and had made graceful fun of agony aunts.

And Colin, too, had been affectionate, a rare thing for him, and had telephoned friends about the new play.

It was all so bad for them both, it was all *terrible*, but after all only another little blow in years and years of them—as she was telling herself, waiting for her knees to get back their strength, while she

gripped the edge of a drawer with one hand and stirred with the other, eyes closed.

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Behind her Johnny was holding forth about the capitalist press and its lies about the Soviet Union, about Fidel Castro, and how he was being misrepresented.

That Frances had been scarcely touched by years of Johnny's strictures, or his lexicon, was shown by the way, after a recent lecture, she had murmured, 'He seems quite an interesting person.' Johnny had snapped at her, 'I don't think I've managed to teach you anything, Frances, you are unteachable.'

'Yes, I know, I'm stupid.' That had been a repetition of the great, primal, but at the same time final, moment, when Johnny had returned to her for the second time, expecting her to take him in: Johnny had shouted that she was a political cretin, a lumpen petite bourgeois, a class enemy, and she had said 'That's right, I'm stupid, now get out.'

She could not go on standing here, knowing that the boys were watching her, nervously, hurriedly, because of her, even if the others were gazing at Johnny with eyes shining with love and admiration.

She said, 'Sophie, give me a hand.'

At once willing hands appeared, Sophie's and, it seemed, everyone's, and dishes were being slid down the centre of the table. There were wonderful smells as the covers came off.

They sat down at the head of the table, glad to sit, not looking at Johnny. All the chairs were full but others stood by the wall, and, if he wanted, he could bring one up and sit down himself. Was he going to do this? He often did, infuriating her, though he believed, it was obvious, that it was a compliment. No, tonight, having made an impression, and got his fill of admiration (if he ever did) Johnny was going to leave—surely? He was not leaving. The wine glasses were full, all around the table. Johnny had brought two bottles of wine: open-handed Johnny, who never entered a room without offerings of wine . . . she was unable to prevent this bile, these bitter words, arriving unwanted on her tongue. Just go away, she was mentally urging him. Just leave.

She had cooked a large, filling, winter stew of beef and chestnuts, from a recipe of Elizabeth David, whose *French Country Cooking* was lying open somewhere in the kitchen. (Years later she would say, Good Lord, I was part of a culinary revolution and didn't know it.) She was convinced that these youngsters did not eat 'properly' unless it was at this table. Andrew was dispensing mashed potatoes flavoured with celeriac. Sophie ladled out stew. Creamed spinach and buttered carrots were being allotted by Colin. Johnny stood watching, silenced for the moment because no one was looking at him.

Why didn't he leave?

Around the table this evening were what she thought of as the regulars: or at least some of them. On her left was Andrew, who had served himself generously, but now sat looking down at the food as if he didn't recognise it. Next to him was Geoffrey Bone, Colin's schoolfriend, who had spent all his holidays with them since she could remember. He did not get on with his parents, Colin said. (But why did, after all?) Beside him Colin had already turned his round flushed face towards his father, a accusing anguish, while his knife and fork rested in his hands. Next to Colin, was Rose Trimble, who

had been Andrew's girlfriend, if briefly: an obligatory flutter with Marxism had taken him to weekend seminar entitled, 'Africa Bursts Its Chains!', and there Rose had been. Their affair (had been that?—she was sixteen) had ended, but Rose still came here, seemed in fact to have moved in. Opposite Rose was Sophie, a Jewish girl in the full bloom of her beauty, slender, black gleaming eyes, black gleaming hair, and people seeing her had to be afflicted with thoughts of the intrinsic unfairness of Fate, and then of the imperatives of Beauty and its claims. Colin was in love with her. So was Andrew. So was Geoffrey. Next to Sophie, and the very opposite, in every way, of Geoffrey, who was so correctly good-looking, English, polite, well-behaved, was stormy and suffering Daniel, who had just been threatened with expulsion from St Joseph's for shoplifting. He was deputy head boy, and Geoffrey was head boy, and had had to convey to Daniel that he must reform or else—an empty threat certainly, made for the sake of impressing the others with the seriousness of what they all did. The little event, ironically discussed by these worldly-wise children, was confirmation, if any was needed, of the inherent unfairness of the world, since Geoffrey shoplifted all the time, but it was hard to associate that open eagerly-polite face with wrongdoing. And there was another ingredient here: Daniel worshipped Geoffrey, always had, and to be admonished by his hero was more than he could bear.

Next to Daniel was a girl Frances had not seen before, but she expected to be enlightened in good time. She was a fair well-washed well-presented girl whose name appeared to be Jill. On Frances's right was Lucy, not from St Joseph's: she was Daniel's girlfriend from Dartington, often here. Lucy, who at an ordinary school would certainly have been prefect, being decisive, clever, responsible and born to rule, said that progressive schools, or at least Dartington, suited some people well, but others needed discipline, and she wished she was at an ordinary school with rules and regulations and exams one had to work for. Daniel said that St Joseph's was hypocritical shit, preaching freedom but when it came to the point clamping down with morality. 'I wouldn't say clamping down,' explained Geoffrey pleasantly to everyone, protecting his acolyte, 'it was more indicating the limits.' 'For some,' said Daniel. 'Unfair, I'll grant you,' said Geoffrey.

Sophie said she adored St Joseph's and adored Sam (the headmaster). The boys tried to look indifferent at this news.

Colin continued to do so badly at exams that his unthreatened life was a tribute to the school's famous tolerance.

Of Rose's many grievances against life, she complained most that she had not been sent to progressive school, and when their virtues or otherwise were discussed, which happened frequently and noisily, she would sit silent, her always rubicund face ever redder with anger. Her shitty horrible parents had sent her to a normal girls' school in Sheffield, but though she had apparently 'dropped out', and appeared to be living here, her accusations against it did not lessen, and she tended to burst into tears, crying out that they didn't know how lucky they were. Andrew had actually met Rose's parents, who were both officials in the local council. 'And what is wrong with them?' Frances had enquired, hoping to hear well of them, because she wanted Rose to go, since she did not like the girls. (And why did she not tell Rose to leave? That would not have been in the spirit of the times.) 'I am afraid they are just ordinary,' replied Andrew, smiling. 'They are conventional small-town people, and I do think they are a bit out of their depth with Rose.'



‘Ah,’ said Frances, seeing the possibility of Rose’s returning home recede. And there was something else here too. Had she not said of her parents that they were boring and conventional? Not that they were shitty fascists, but perhaps she would have described them thus had the epithets been available to her as they were to Rose. How could she criticise the girl for wanting to leave parents who *did not understand her*?

Second helpings were already being piled on to plates—all except Andrew’s. He had hardly touched his food. Frances pretended not to notice.

Andrew was in trouble, but how bad it was hard to say.

He had done pretty well at Eton, had made friends, which she gathered was what they were meant to do, and was going to Cambridge next year. This year, he said, he was loafing. And he certainly was. He slept sometimes until four or five in the afternoon, looked ill, and concealed—what?—behind his charm, his social competence.

Frances knew he was unhappy—but it was not news that her sons were unhappy. Something should be done. It was Julia who came down to her layer of the house to say, ‘Frances, have you been inside Andrew’s room?’

‘I wouldn’t dare go into his room without asking.’

‘You are his mother, I believe.’

The gulfs between them illumined by this exchange caused Frances, as always, to stare helplessly at her mother-in-law. She did not know what to say. Julia, an immaculate figure, stood there like Judgement, waiting, and Frances felt herself to be a schoolgirl, wanting to shift from foot to foot.

‘You can hardly see across the room for the smoke,’ said Julia.

‘Oh, I see, you mean pot—marijuana? But Julia, a lot of them smoke it.’ She did not dare say she had tried it herself.

‘So, to you it’s nothing? It’s not important?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘He sleeps all day, he fuddles himself with that smoke, he doesn’t eat.’

‘Julia, what do you want me to do?’

‘Talk to him.’

‘I can’t . . . I couldn’t . . . he wouldn’t listen to me.’

‘Then I will talk to him.’ And Julia went, turning on a crisp little heel, leaving the scent of roses behind her.

Julia and Andrew did talk. Soon Andrew took to visiting Julia in her rooms, which no one had dared to do, and returned often with information meant to smooth paths and oil wheels.

‘She’s not as bad as you think. In fact, she’s rather a poppet.’

‘Not the word that would immediately come to my mind.’

‘Well, I like her.’

‘I wish she’d come downstairs sometimes. She might eat with us?’

‘She wouldn’t come. She doesn’t approve of us,’ said Colin.

‘She might reform us,’—Frances attempted humour.

‘Ha! Ha! But why don’t you invite her?’

‘I’m scared of Julia,’ said Frances, admitting it for the first time.

‘She’s frightened of you!’ said Andrew.

‘Oh, but that’s absurd. I am sure she’s never been frightened of anyone.’

‘Look, mother, you don’t understand. She has had such a sheltered life. She’s not used to our rickety ways. You forget that until grandfather died I don’t think she boiled an egg for herself. And you cope with hungry hordes and speak their language. Don’t you see?’ He had said *their* not *our*.

‘All I know is she sits up there eating a finger of smoked herring and two inches of bread and drinking one glass of wine while we sit down here guzzling great meals. We could send up a tray, perhaps.’

‘I’ll ask her,’ Andrew said, and presumably did, but nothing changed.

Frances made herself go up the stairs to his room. Six o’clock, and already getting dark. This had been a couple of weeks ago. She knocked, though her legs had nearly taken her downstairs again.

After quite a wait, she heard, ‘Come in.’

Frances went in. Andrew lay dressed on the bed, smoking. The window beyond him showed a blur of cold rain.

‘It’s six o’clock,’ she said.

‘I know it is six o’clock.’

Frances sat down, without the invitation she needed. The room was a big one, furnished with only solid furniture and some beautiful Chinese lamps. Andrew seemed the wrong inhabitant for it, and Frances could not help bringing to mind Julia’s husband, the diplomat, who would certainly be

home here.

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‘Have you come to lecture me? Don’t bother, Julia already has done her bit.’

‘I’m worried,’ said Frances, her voice trembled; years, decades of worry were crowding into her throat.

Andrew lifted his head off the pillow to inspect her. Not with enmity, but rather with weariness. ‘I alarm myself,’ he said. ‘But I think I am about to take myself in hand.’

‘Are you, Andrew? Are you?’

‘After all, it is not as if it were heroin, or coke, or . . . after all, there are no caches of empty bottles rolling about under the bed.’

There were in fact some little blue pills scattered there.

‘What are those little blue pills then?’

‘Ah, the little blue pills. Amphetamines. Don’t worry about them.’

‘And,’ said Frances, quoting, meaning to sound ironical and failing, ‘it’s non-addictive, and you can give it up at any time.’

‘I don’t know about that. I think I’m addicted—to pot, though. It certainly takes the edge off reality. Why don’t you try it?’

‘I did try it. It doesn’t do anything for me.’

‘Too bad,’ said Andrew. ‘I would say that you have more reality than you can cope with.’

He did not say anything more, and so she waited a little, and got up to leave and heard as she closed the door on him, ‘Thanks for coming, Mother. Drop in again.’

Was it possible he wanted her ‘interference’—had been waiting for her to visit him, wanted to talk?

On this particular evening she could feel the bonds between herself and her two sons, but it was all terrible—the three of them were close tonight because of disappointment, a blow falling where it had before.

Sophie was talking. ‘Did you know about Frances’s wonderful new part?’ she said to John. ‘She’s going to be a star. It’s so *wonderful*. Have you read the play?’

‘Sophie,’ said Frances, ‘I’m not doing the play after all.’

Sophie stared at her, her great eyes already full of tears. ‘What do you mean? You can’t . . . it’s not . . . it *can’t* be true.’

‘I’m not doing it, Sophie.’

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Both sons were looking at Sophie, probably even kicking her under the table: *shut up*.

‘Oh,’ gasped the lovely girl, and buried her face in her hands.

‘Things have changed,’ said Frances. ‘I can’t explain.’

Now both boys were looking, full of accusation, at their father. He shifted a bit, seemed to shrug, suppressed that, smiled and then suddenly came out with: ‘There’s something else I’ve come to say to you, Frances.’

And so that was why he hadn’t left, but had stood uncomfortably there, not sitting down: he had something more to say.

Frances braced herself and saw that Colin and Andrew did the same.

‘I have a big favour to ask of you,’ said Johnny, direct to his betrayed wife.

‘And what is that?’

‘You know about Tilly, of course . . . you know, Phyllida’s girl?’

‘Of course I know about her.’

Andrew, visiting Phyllida, had allowed it to be understood that it was not a harmonious household and that the child was giving a lot of trouble.

‘Phyllida doesn’t seem able to cope with Tilly.’

At this, Frances laughed loudly, for she already knew what was bound to come. She said, ‘No, it’s simply not possible, it isn’t *on*.’

‘Yes, Frances, think about it. They don’t get on. Phyllida’s at her wit’s end. And so am I. I want you to have Tilly here. You are so good with . . .’

Frances was breathless with anger, saw that the two boys were white with it; the three were sitting silent, looking at each other.

Sophie was exclaiming, ‘Oh, Frances, and you are so kind, it’s so wonderful.’

Geoffrey, who had after all been so long visiting this house that he could with justice be described as a member of the household, followed Sophie with, ‘What a groovy idea.’

‘Just a minute, Johnny,’ said Frances. ‘You are asking me to take on your second wife’s daughter because you two can’t cope with her?’

‘That’s about it,’ admitted Johnny, smiling.

There was a long, long pause. It had occurred to enthusiastic Sophie and Geoffrey that Frances was ~~not taking this in the spirit of universal liberal idealism they had at first assumed she would: the spirit of *everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds*, which would one day be shorthand for 'The Sixties'~~.

Frances managed to bring out: 'You are perhaps planning to contribute something to help support?'—and realised that, saying this, she was agreeing.

At this Johnny glanced around the young faces, judging if they were as shocked by her pettiness as he was. 'Money,' he said loftily, 'is really not the point here.'

Frances was again silenced. She got up, went to the working surface near the stove, stood with her back to the room.

'I want to bring Tilly here,' said Johnny. 'And in fact she's here. She's in the car.'

Colin and Andrew both got up and went to their mother, standing on either side of her. This enabled her to turn around and face Johnny across the room. She could not speak. And Johnny, seeing his former wife flanked by their sons, three angry people with white accusing faces, was also, but just for the moment, silenced.

Then he rallied, stretched out his arms, palms towards them, and said, 'From each according to their capacity, to each according to their need.' And let his arms drop.

'Oh, that is so beautiful,' said Rose.

'Groovy,' said Geoffrey.

The newcomer, Jill, breathed, 'Oh, it's lovely.'

All eyes were now on Johnny, a situation he was well used to. He stood, receiving rays of criticism, beams of love, and smiled at them. He was a tall man, Comrade Johnny, with already greying hair cut like a Roman's, *at your service always*, and he wore tight black jeans, a black leather Mao jacket especially made for him by an admiring comrade in the rag trade. Severity was his preferred style, smiling or not, for a smile could never be more than a temporary concession, but he was smiling boldly now.

'Do you mean to say,' said Andrew, 'that Tilly's been out there in the car waiting, all this time?'

'Good God,' said Colin. 'Typical.'

'I'll go and bring her in,' said Johnny, and marched out, brushing past his ex-wife and Colin and Andrew, not looking at them.

No one moved. Frances thought if her sons had not been so close, enveloping her with their support, she would have fallen. All the faces around the table were turned towards them: that this was a very bad moment, they had at last understood.

They heard the front door open—Johnny of course had a key to his mother’s house—and then in the doorway to this room, the kitchen, stood a little frightened figure, in a big duffel-coat, trembling with cold, trying to smile, but instead out of her burst a great wail, as she looked at Frances, who she had been told was kind and would look after her, ‘until we get things straightened out’. She was a little bird blown by a storm, and Frances was across the room to her, and had her arms round her, saying ‘It’s all right, shhh, it’s all right.’ Then she remembered this was not a child, but a girl of fourteen or so, and her impulse, to sit down and hold this waif on her lap was out of order. Meanwhile Johnny, just behind the girl, was saying, ‘I think bed is indicated,’ and then, generally around the room, ‘I’ll be off.’ But did not go.

The girl was looking in appeal at Andrew, whom after all she did know, among all these strangers.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it.’ He put his arm round Tilly, and turned to go out of the room.

‘I’ll put her down in the basement,’ he said. ‘It’s nice and warm down there.’

‘Oh, no, no, no, please,’ cried the girl. ‘Don’t, I cannot be alone, I can’t, don’t make me.’

‘Of course not, if you don’t want to,’ said Andrew. Then, to his mother, ‘I’ll put a bed in with me for tonight.’ And he led her out. They all sat quiet, listening to how he coaxed her up the stairs.

Johnny was face to face with Frances, who said to him, low, hoping it would not be heard by the others, ‘Go away, Johnny. Just get out.’

He tried an appealing smile around, caught Rose’s eyes, who did smile back, but she was doubtful, withstood passionate reproach from Sophie, nodded sternly at Geoffrey, whom he had known for years. And left. The front door shut. The car door slammed.

Now Colin was hovering behind Frances, touching her arm, her shoulder, not knowing what to do.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘come on upstairs.’ They went out together. Frances began swearing as she climbed the stairs, first softly, so as not to be heard by the young, then loudly, ‘Fuck him, fuck him, fuck, the shit, the absolute *shit*.’ In her sitting-room she sat crying, while Colin, at a loss, at last thought of getting her tissues and then a glass of water.

Meanwhile Julia had been told by Andrew what was going on. She came down, opened Frances’s door without knocking, and marched in. ‘Please explain it to me,’ she said. ‘I don’t understand. Why do you let him behave like this?’

• • •

Julia von Arne was born in a particularly charming part of Germany, near Stuttgart, a region of hills, streams and vineyards. She was the only girl, the third child in a genial gentle family. Her father was a diplomat, her mother a musician. In July 1914 came visiting Philip Lennox, a promising Third Secretary from the embassy in Berlin. That fourteen-year-old Julia should fall in love with handsome

Philip—he was twenty-five—was not surprising, but he fell in love with her. She was pretty, tiny, with golden ringlets, and wore frocks the romantic man told her were like flowers. She had been brought up strictly, by governesses, English and French, and to him it seemed that every gesture she made, every smile, every turn of her head, was formal, prescribed, as if she moved in a dance. Like all girls taught to be conscious of their bodies, because of the frightful dangers of immodesty, her eyes spoke for her. He could strike to the heart with a glance, and when she lowered delicate eyelids over blue invitations to love he felt he was being rejected. He had sisters, whom he had seen a few days ago in Sussex, joyful tomboys enjoying the exemplary summer that has been celebrated in so many memoirs and novels. His sister's friend, Betty, had been teased because she came to supper with solid brown arms where white scratches showed how she had been playing in the hay with the dogs. His family had watched him try to see if he fancied this girl, who would make a suitable wife, and he had been prepared to consider her. This little German miss seemed to him as glamorous as a beauty glimpsed in a harem, all promise and hidden bliss, and he fancied that if a sunbeam did strike her she would melt like a snowflake. She gave him a red rose from the garden, and he knew she was offering him her heart. He declared his love under the moonlight, and next day spoke to her father. Yes, he knew that fourteen was too young, but he was asking for formal permission to propose when she was sixteen. And so they parted, in 1914, while war was coming to a boil, but like many liberal well-adjusted people it seemed to both the von Arnes and the Lennoxes that it was ridiculous Germany and England could go to war. When war was declared Philip had left his love in tears just two weeks before. In those days governments seemed compelled to announce that wars must be over by Christmas, and the lovers were sure they would see each other soon.

Almost at once xenophobia was poisoning Julia's love. Her family did not mind her loving her Englishman—did not their respective Emperors call themselves cousins?—but the neighbours commented, and servants whispered and gossiped. During the years of the war rumours followed Julia and her family too. Her three brothers were fighting in the Trenches, her father was in the War Office and her mother did war work, but those few days of fever in July 1914 marked them all for comment and suspicion. Julia never lost her faith in her love and in Philip. He was wounded, twice, and in devious ways she heard about it and wept for him. It did not matter, cried Julia's heart, how badly he was wounded, she would love him for ever. He was demobbed in 1919. She was waiting for him, knowing he was coming to claim her, when into the room where five years before they had flirted came a man she felt she ought to know. An empty sleeve was pinned up on his chest, and his face was taut and lined. She was now nearly twenty. He saw a tall young woman—she had grown some inches with fair hair piled on top of her head, held with a big jet arrow, and wearing heavy black for two dead brothers. A third brother, a boy—he was not yet twenty—had been wounded and sat, still in his uniform, a stiff leg propped before him on a stool. The two so recent enemies, stared at each other. Then Philip, not smiling, went forward with an outstretched hand. The youth made an involuntary movement, turning away, with a grimace, but he recovered himself and civilisation was reinstated as he smiled and the two men shook hands. This scene, which after all has repeated itself in various forms since then, did not then have as much weight on it as it would now. Irony, which celebrates that element which we persist in excluding from our vision of things, would have been too much for them to bear if we have become coarser-fibred.

And now these two lovers who would not have recognised each other passing in a street, had to decide whether their dreams of each other for all those terrible years were strong enough to carry the

through into marriage. Nothing was left of the enchanting prim little girl, nor of the sentimental man who had, until it crumbled away, carried a dead red rose next to his heart. The great blue eyes were sad, and he tended to lapse into silences, just like her younger brother, when remembering things that could be understood only by other soldiers.

These two married quietly: hardly the time for a big German–English wedding. In London war fever was abating, though people still talked about the Boche and the Hun. People were polite to Julia. For the first time she wondered if choosing Philip had not been a mistake, yet she believed they loved each other, and both were pretending they were serious people by nature and not saddened beyond curing. And yet the war did recede and the worst of the war hatreds passed. Julia, who had suffered in Germany for her English love, now tried to become English, in an act of will. She had spoken English well enough, but took lessons again, and soon spoke as no English person ever did, an exquisite perfect English, every word separate. She knew her manners were formal, and tried to become more casual. Her clothes: they were perfect too, but after all, she was a diplomat's wife and had to keep up appearances. As the English put it.

They started married life in a little house in Mayfair, and there she entertained, as was expected of her, with the aid of a cook and a maid, and achieved something like the standards she remembered from her home. Meanwhile Philip had discovered that to marry a German woman had not been the best prescription for an unclouded career. Discussions with his superiors revealed that certain positions would be barred to him, in Germany, for instance, and he might find himself edged out of the straight highway to the top, and find himself in places like South Africa or Argentina. He decided to avoid disappointments, and switched to administration. He would have a fine career, but nothing of the glamour of foreign ministries. Sometimes he met in a sister's house the Betty whom he could have married—and who was still unwed, because of so many men being killed—and wondered how different life could have been.

When Jolyon Meredith Wilhelm Lennox was born in 1920 he had a nurse and then a nanny. He was a long thin child, with golden curls and combative critical blue eyes, often directed at his mother. He had soon learned from his nanny that she was a German: he had a little tantrum and was difficult for a few days. He was taken to visit his German family, but this was not a success: he disliked the place, and the different manners—he was expected to sit at mealtimes with his hands beside him on either side of his plate when not actually eating, speak when spoken to, and to click his heels when he made a request. He refused to go back. Julia argued with Philip about her child being sent off at seven to school. This is not unusual now, but then Julia was being brave. Philip told her that everyone in their class did this, and anyway look at him!—he had gone to boarding school at seven. Yes, he did remember he had been a bit homesick . . . never mind, it wore off. That argument, 'Look at me!' expected to cast down opposition because of the speaker's conviction of his superiority or at least rightness, did not convince Julia. In Philip there was a place forever barred to her, a reserve, a coldness, which at first she ascribed to the war, the trenches, the soldier's hidden psychological scars. But then she had begun to doubt: she had never achieved intimacy enough with the wives of her husband's colleagues to ask if they too experienced this forbidden place in their men, the area marked VERBOTEN, No Entrance—but she did observe, she noticed a good deal. No, she thought, if you are going to take a child from its mother so young . . . She lost the fight, and lost her son; who thereafter was polite, affable, if often impatient.



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