

FROM
A NECESSARY FICTION

Laura sat at the breakfast table, conscious it was the first Saturday her father was not there to join them. Opposite, her mother, immaculately groomed as always, was spreading a fine layer of Seville marmalade over her toast. "I'm surprised Oliver isn't taking you out for the day, Laura."

"I asked him not to."

"How very perverse of you."

"I don't feel like socialising at the moment, that's all."

"Life goes on, Laura. You're becoming morose. It won't do."

There was little to be gained in putting forward a contradictory point of view. A silence settled and pervaded the room, filling the space between them. In the hallway, the grandfather clock struck nine.

Daphne finished her tea and replaced the cup delicately onto its saucer. "I thought I'd telephone Millie after breakfast and ask her to take me over to Broxley. Hetty will want to give me her condolences in person," she said. It was a flimsy excuse to impose herself on her sisters in the absence of a direct invitation, and typically thoughtless to expect Millicent to drop everything at a moment's notice to drive over and collect her. It was also hypocritical. Henrietta was twenty-six years Daphne's senior, and because she was 'only' her half-sister – which Daphne clearly regarded as putting some distance between them – she was rarely given the time of day beyond a perfunctory enquiry as to her health. It was an unnecessary snub to a lovely old lady for whom Laura felt a particularly fondness.

"Millie said she would take you out on Monday," Laura reminded her.

Daphne dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin. "I can't expect Hetty to wait until then, can I? It would be most remiss of me."

Laura wished she had the energy to contest the deceitfulness of this little speech, but thought better of it. What was the point? There was going to be friction enough in the months to come.

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Could she have said "No"? – in the midst of this family with such fixed expectations of their marriage? She was cornered, with no way out. He had not even waited for her reply. He had smiled at her indulgently and produced a small box from his waistcoat pocket. Inside was the engagement ring she still wore on family occasions: a trio of diamonds set on a twisted gold band; it sparkled brightly, reflecting the lights in the chandeliers. With a flourish, he placed it on her finger, kissed her hand and raised it for everyone to see. To applause and general congratulations, he had reached across and shaken her father's hand and given Daphne, glowing with unbounded satisfaction, a quick peck on the cheek. The remainder of the evening had become a blur. All she could remember now was her father, watching her intently, and old Aunt Henrietta, sitting on the table next to her, gazing at her with large, sad eyes.

If she could remember little of that evening, she could vividly recall the day that followed – the most abiding memory of all. Oliver had called to collect her in his new car – a black Riley like his father's. He was more interested in driving than their final destination.

It had been a beautiful summer's afternoon, with light, fluffy clouds in a china-blue sky. After an hour or so, they had stopped in a secluded spot beyond Broxley, and got out to walk down to the river. A warm breeze ruffled the leaves of the willows along the bank. He had spread out the travel rug in the shade of an alder, and they had sat in silence watching the sunlight dancing on the water. He had lit a cigarette. The minutes had passed. The ring on her finger still felt strange, and she had been thinking of Martin. After a while, she had screwed up her courage enough to ask him, "Oliver – do you love me?"

He had laughed at her. “Good God, Laura! What a question! Of course I do.” But he had turned away, finishing his cigarette and throwing the butt into the water.

“When will we get married?”

“In four years time, I suppose. When they make me junior partner.”

“It’s a long time.”

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Someone had put on Frank Sinatra’s ‘Night and Day’. Couples were beginning to smooch.

She resented his curiosity. “Why do you want to know?”

He smiled – that slow, lazy smile. “Just wondering,” he said. Frank Sinatra crooned on. “If you finish your coffee, we could have a dance.”

Fast worker, she thought, briefly imagining smooching her way round the room with him. Definitely someone she might be glad to dance with in the future. And why not? But not now. The fiction of her engagement had to be maintained a few weeks longer. “Thanks for the offer,” she said, surveying him over the rim of her mug, “But as Jules pointed out – I’m already spoken for.”

He looked serious for a moment, apparently considering her reply. Then, with a very deliberate movement, allowed the hand on the back of the sofa to slip down onto her shoulder. “You’re not wearing a ring,” he said, his other hand delicately tracing the length of the bare finger of her left hand as she held the mug.

With great care, she moved away from him slightly, downed the rest of the coffee and leaned forward to put the mug on the floor. Her heart was thumping. This was Martin Evans territory – only moreso. She hoped no one had seen what had happened. Rosemary was draped around Jules not far away, but was too busy whispering into his ear. Stephen was by the record player in full view, but mercifully, he too was preoccupied, keeping an eye on Antonia. John Rufford’s hand was now down on the cushion immediately behind her – not quite touching – but very close. If she leaned back again, he would almost certainly be in intimate contact. She was amazed at his boldness. “Would you mind moving your hand,” she instructed, swivelling round to admonish him.

“If you insist,” he said.

“I do.”

He complied, still smiling at her.

Frank Sinatra had been taken off the turntable and a stack of 45s was being piled onto the auto-load. He was still contemplating her. “You deserve better,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“What I said. You deserve better,” he repeated. He was being deadly serious, and suddenly, without warning, he put an audacious hand on her thigh.