

“Have a bit of sense, woman!” The Rainbow Man scolded. “If he’s knockin’ ye around ye’ll get the hell out of there, if you’ve any respect for yerself atall atall.”

Ellen and Aubery

I arrived at London University, my first time away from home, shy, awkward, embarrassed about my Belfast accent, a cipher in a vast transit-camp of displaced overseas students. Too inhibited to speak to anyone, too proud to admit that I was lonely, I listened to the creaking of other people’s beds and the groans of pleasure and occasional barks of anger through the paper-thin walls of my tiny cell in the austere Halls of Residence. Self-pity and homesickness engulfed me.

A card appeared on the notice board advertising a room in a shared flat nearby. Sparse details, but I could afford the rent, and it offered the prospect of human contact, flatmates, friendship-networks.

It was a two-bedroom conversion in a large crumbling Victorian house. Aubery, the lease-holder, was not much older than me, but dressed like a sixty-year-old: three-piece suit, starched white shirt, dismal grey tie, big signet ring on his right hand. His voice conveyed a sneering condescension, and an inability to pronounce the letter ‘R’.

Aubery’s girlfriend however was a delight. Strikingly pretty, with long dark hair and a musical Welsh lilt in her voice, she lit up the whole room with her smile. Her name was Ellen. I was captivated at first sight.

I left expecting little of the interview, and was overjoyed when Ellen phoned the following morning and told me I could move in. I knew instinctively that she had

wanted me and that Aubery had not, but she had somehow prevailed.

Ellen was a first-year student at my college. Aubery was a junior accountant, but earning good money. I soon realized that he was a total fake. His superior accent and manner, his name, his vaguely aristocratic background, probably even his lisp, were entirely fabricated.

Aubery's working day was elastic. Sometimes he would arrive home before the five o'clock rush-hour, sometimes late at night.

Ellen kept similar hours to myself. In the mornings she would kiss Aubery goodbye, then we would walk together to the campus, and at lunch meet again and chat some more. In the evenings, before Aubery got back, we would often sit together studying, talking, or simply watching TV.

Our friendship blossomed. The only topic we avoided was Ellen's relationship with Aubery. She somehow knew that I had a low opinion of him, and the subject became taboo. Instead we talked about philosophy, politics, religion, literature, films, music, and eventually about ourselves. I learned about Ellen's Welsh village, stained permanently black with coal-dust, streets so steep that hand-rails were fitted along the pavements, where jobs were few and suicides common. From me Ellen learned about the festering bigotry that rotted the minds of Belfast's young. We told one another our dreams and our fears and our past histories. We poured out our souls. The only boundary to our conversation was what went on between Ellen and Aubery when their bedroom door closed.

I helped Ellen with one of her assignments and she bought me a book as a present. I can see its spine from where I am sitting now.

My friendship with Ellen made everything in my life infinitely better. A spring came into my step, I started eating

properly and paying attention to my appearance, and made other friends at the University without even trying.

All of this time, Aubery virtually ignored me. I tried to be friendly but I could seldom think of anything to say. Even Ellen seemed to have little to say to him while I was present. Every night they would disappear into their bedroom, and there, I assumed, was where they opened-up to one another.

Then one morning Aubery appeared alone at breakfast, ate hastily and hurried off, telling me gruffly that Ellen “wasn’t well”. I waited until he had gone and tapped gently on her bedroom door.

She came out, wrapped in a gown, and with vivid red and purple bruises below her left eye.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Without a word I opened my arms and embraced her. She hugged me back and we stood there silently for several minutes.

I have never experienced such murderous anger, before or since. But Ellen pacified me. She had provoked him, she claimed. Cruel things had been said. She didn’t want to talk about it, they would sort it out between themselves.

Skiping lectures, I spent all that day at home with Ellen. Towards midday she had a little cry in my arms and gave me one fleeting kiss on the lips and told me that I was very sweet. I treasured that kiss and longed for more but I knew that the time was not right.

In bed that night, I strained to hear what was going on in their room, but the separating walls were thick, and although I thought I could hear occasional raised voices it was difficult to be certain.

As I drifted off to sleep I heard Ellen’s timid tapping on my bedroom door. This time there was a little trickle of blood running down her face, caused, I later learned, by Aubery’s heavy signet ring. She collapsed, crying, into my

arms, and I led her gently to my bed and held her tenderly for the remainder of the night. Without the need for words we both knew that this was now Ellen's bedroom as well as mine.

Aubery accepted the new situation more readily than I would have expected. I told him at breakfast that Ellen and I would be leaving and that if he touched her again he would be sorry he had ever been born. I don't know what I would really have done because I had never hit anybody in my life, but I was a great deal bigger than Aubery and he didn't put my threat to the test.

To an outside observer, surprisingly little would have changed. Ellen and I still walked to University together, but now we held hands or linked arms. Aubery caught the same morning train and returned at the same erratic hours. But internally, the dynamics of the flat had altered beyond all recognition.

Both Aubery and I underwent a personality change. With Ellen as my lover as well as my friend, I felt ten feet tall: my essay grades soared and I am convinced that I even looked different. Aubery on the other hand seemed to shrink into the background, scratching around unobtrusively like a mouse in a larder.

With the exams and the long summer holidays only a few weeks away, Ellen and I made plans. I would buy one of the old motor-caravans that homeward-bound Australians and New Zealanders sold on the Earls Court Road, and in this we would visit Ellen's village in Wales, then return east for the car-ferry to France, then south towards the Mediterranean, earning money by grape-picking or however we could as we travelled down.

The vehicle was purchased, and I breezed through my exams, elated by how good life had become. Nobody could ask for a nicer girlfriend than Ellen, and I would have her all to myself the whole summer long!

The day drew near. Aubery announced that he had put down a deposit on a flat of his own in a more fashionable part of London and would be moving on. I paid little attention.

Ellen and I planned to leave immediately after the last of our exams. We would meet outside the flat, packed and ready to go.

On the morning of the great day, Ellen seemed slightly preoccupied but I put it down to pre-examination nerves. I galloped through my “Ethics I” and left the examination hall before the time was up.

When I arrived back at the flat I noticed that Aubery’s car had already gone, and the front door was locked. My rucksack had been loaded into the van, no doubt by Ellen, but hers was nowhere to be seen, and neither was she.

Then I found the note under the windscreen-wiper. I still have it, folded inside the cover of that book. It reads:

My Darling David,

You have been so sweet and treated me better than I have ever been treated before and I will never forget you. But you do not love me and you do not need me. You are strong and Aubery is weak. I always knew that. I can not leave him the way he is now.

Aubery is going to change. I am going to be okay. Please find a nice girl who deserves you. I envy her already, whoever she is.

Forgive me David and please try to understand.

God bless.

Ellen.

I never saw either of them again.

I am a great deal older now. I have never seen Ellen's village and I have never gone grape-picking in the South of France. Although in my dreams I have done both, many times.