

START²⁸
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Tom puts up his chair and sits

Ruth Annie looks very well. From what I've seen.

Tom The point is—I think I'm in her bad books.

Ruth Really?

Tom Yes. I rather went at her last night. Tore her off a strip.

Ruth You did?

Tom Yes, I thought it might—well, she seemed to be taking me far too much for granted.

Ruth Was she?

Tom So I thought a couple of sharp words might do the trick. I told her to straighten herself up.

Ruth Did you?

Tom Told her she looked a mess.

Ruth Really.

Tom Yes. I threatened to belt her. Really let rip.

Ruth I see.

Tom I haven't slept a wink. Do you think I've damaged my chances?

Ruth Chances of what?

Tom I don't know. Just general chances.

Ruth Well. Some women do respond awfully well to that sort of treatment.

They enjoy tremendously being told they look a mess—and they actually thrill to the threat of physical violence. I've never met one that does, mind you, but they probably do exist. In books. By men. But then, there are probably some women who enjoy being thrown into canals. One just doesn't bump into them every day—not even in this family.

Tom You reckon I might possibly have been on the wrong track?

Ruth I'd have thought so.

Tom Oh, well. For once he was wrong.

Ruth Who was wrong?

Tom Norman.

Ruth Norman? Did Norman tell you to do that?

Tom He suggested I do something of the sort.

Ruth Insult her and threaten to beat her up?

Tom Yes. He's generally right. About women, anyway. He's got a good instinct, has Norman. Has a way with women. I shouldn't really be saying this, should I?

Ruth (*after looking at Tom for a while incredulously*) Tom.

Tom Um?

Ruth At the risk of pouring bad advice on bad, I think perhaps I ought to point you in the right direction.

Tom Do. Yes, do. Any advice . . .

Ruth Firstly, there are fallacies in Norman's well-known universal theory of womanhood with which, as it happens as his wife, I am familiar. He claims that women can be divided into two groups—the ones you stroke and the ones you swipe. There has been some research done on this and it's been discovered quite recently that they are actually a little more complex.

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Tom Yes, yes. It follows . . .

Ruth Good. They enjoy flattery no less than a man does. Though if you are flattering a woman, it pays to be a little more subtle. You don't have to bother with men, they believe any compliment automatically . . .

Tom Oh, come on. Hardly, hardly . . .

Ruth Well, we won't argue that. All I'm saying is, Tom, you're an intelligent man, you're not unattractive . . .

Tom Oh well, thank you very much.

Ruth And you obviously feel a lot of things that you don't show—necessarily. Which is marvellous in a crisis but a bit disheartening in times of peace.

Tom How do you mean?

Ruth I think you have to give a little. Give, Tom, do you see?

Tom Ah.

Ruth Do you follow me?

Tom (*comprehending*) Aha—yes. (*He sits back and ponders this*) Give a little what?

Ruth Oh, my God. (*Impatiently*) You're a very frustrating person to talk to, Tom. I feel like a tame mouse on one of those wheels they have in cages—one keeps running round and round like mad getting nowhere.

Tom That's interesting you should mention that. There have been some studies done. Mice and wheels and it's really quite remarkable. One of the things they discovered . . .

Ruth Yes, right. Thank you.

Tom Eh?

Ruth Don't let's wander off the subject.

Tom No.

Ruth (*studying him*) I think your brain works all right. I think what must happen is, it receives a message from the outside—but once that message gets inside your head, it must be like an unfiled internal memo in some vast Civil Service department. It gets shunted from desk to desk with nobody willing to take responsibility for it. Let's try some simple reactions, shall we? I hate you, Tom. Do you hear? I hate you.

Tom Um?

Ruth Oh well, try again. I love you, Tom. I love you.

Tom (*laughing nervously*) I don't quite get this—a game, is it?

Ruth No, Tom, it is not a game. It's an attempt to communicate.

Tom Ah.

Ruth You're refreshing after Norman, I'll give you that. Who is never one to hide anything. He has three emotions for every occasion.

Tom I know what it is. Why you look different. You're not wearing your glasses.

Ruth No.

Tom Makes a great difference to you, that. Without your glasses.

Ruth Thank you, Tom. That's good. You're learning.

Tom I think I prefer you with them on, actually. It gives your face a better shape. (*Gesturing vaguely*) Sort of . . .

Ruth (*menacing*) Tom . . .

Tom Um?

Ruth Do you get on well with your animals, by any chance?

Tom Yes, yes, generally . . .

Ruth You amaze me. You have a disastrous effect on me, did you know that?

Tom Oh.

Ruth Everything tends to boil over ever so slightly.

Tom Oh. It's pretty warm.

Ruth I have a desire to put on my glasses and take off my clothes and dance naked on the grass for you, Tom. I'd put on my glasses not in order to improve the shape of my face, but in order to see your reaction, if any. And as I whirled faster and faster—the sun glinting on my lenses—flashing messages of passion and desire, I would hurl you to the ground, rip off your clothes and we would roll over and over making mad, torrid, steaming love together. How does that grab you, Tom?

Tom *(after a moment)* Good Lord. *(He laughs)* Have to be careful where you rolled on this grass.

Ruth Oh. *(She sits back exhausted, head in hands)*

Tom *(watching her anxiously)* Ruth? Are you all right? Fairly hot this sun. Nearly overhead. *(Rising)* Perhaps you ought to have a lie down . . .

Ruth I'm sorry. I'm exhausted. I've done my best. I'm sorry.

Tom *(flapping round her)* Can I get you an aspirin?

Ruth lies back with her eyes closed. Tom moves anxiously back to his chair and sits

Look, I had no idea you felt like this. I honestly had no idea.

Ruth Like what?

Tom Like that. With me.

Ruth *(through gritted teeth)* I have never hidden my feelings towards you, Tom.

Tom I had no idea . . .

Ruth What are you talking about, Tom?

Tom I feel terrible about this. Absolutely terrible. This has complicated things no end. I mean, it looks as if the ball's in my court rather. Yes, you've bowled me a googly there.

Ruth What the hell is a googly?

Tom If a woman, unexpectedly, suddenly tells you she loves you, where do you go from there?

Ruth Are we talking theoretically?

Tom If you like.

Ruth Well, it's rather up to you then, isn't it? Firstly, you have to ask yourself, do I love her.

Tom Well, I haven't had much time to think. I mean, love's a bit strong. Anyway, there's somebody else.

Ruth What are you talking about?

Tom Well, there's Norman. I've got to think of Norman's feelings.

Ruth Norman? Don't be so damned ridiculous. As far as Norman's concerned, this is some passing romantic pipe-dream. So stop using Norman

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as an excuse for your own inadequacy. If you don't grab quickly, somebody else will sooner or later. Someone with a little more determination than Norman ever had.

Tom Well, I'm sorry. That's all I can say. I had no idea. Does Norman know, do you think?

Ruth What?

Tom About me?

Ruth Of course he knows.

Tom Oh, that explains it. That's why he's been a bit odd towards me. Slightly strained, you know. *(He rises and wanders, ending up behind his chair)* Oh well. *(A pause)* You're looking very nice, by the way. Lovely. Very nice indeed. Very well turned out.

Ruth I think you're a raving lunatic.

Tom *(modestly)* Well, I go a bit over the moon, sometimes. You don't need to worry.

Annie comes out. She has made her effort. She has done her hair, made up a little and has a dress on

Tom Oh, hallo.

Annie Hallo. You both want some coffee out here?

Tom Oh, well . . .

Ruth *(getting up)* No. I've had enough sun. I think I'll go and brave Mother. *(She goes towards the house, leaving her handbag)*

Annie Yes, she's awake. I've just been in with her.

Ruth Right. *(Passing close to Tom)* Talk to her.

Tom Eh?

Ruth Tell her.

Tom Oh.

Annie You want coffee, Tom?

Tom No, that's all right. *(Studying Annie)* You know, you look different somehow. What is it?

Ruth *(as she goes)* She probably hasn't got her glasses on.

Ruth goes in

Tom No. It isn't that. It'll come to me.

Annie Don't force it.

A pause

Did you catch the cat?

Tom Yes. He was round the front there, when I arrived. Sitting in the sun, purring away.

Annie Good. Is his paw better?

Tom Oh, yes. It wasn't anything serious really—I . . .

Annie The way you went on about it, I thought you were going to have to amputate a leg.

Tom No, well—actually, you may not have noticed but you probably seem to have the unhealthiest cat in the country.