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THE WINFIELD WALLPAPER

Dinner at Winfield House, the American Ambassador's Residence in Regent's Park, was usually regarded as a treat, not a duty. But the guests of honor tonight were the Prime Minister and her husband. I had guessed that my invitation was a reward, and then I began to suspect that I was being put to work. I did not really mind – I had nothing else to do. After more than a year in London I still had no lover, no close friends, no recreations. I had plenty of society but not much pleasure: it was not an easy city. And perhaps I overreacted to Ambassador Noyes's invitation. I bought a new dinner jacket and a formal shirt. The shirt cost me forty-seven dollars.

I was heading home to change, and reflecting on the safest topics to discuss with the Prime Minister, when I saw the car. Every Friday evening since early in January I had seen this car parked on the corner of Alexandra Avenue and Prince of Wales Drive, and always two people inside. As the weeks passed I began to be on the watch for the car. The man and woman in the front seat were either talking quietly or embracing. On some evenings they sat slightly apart, sipping from paper cups. Three months later, but always on Fridays, they were still at it.

There was something touching about this weekly romance in the front seat of an old Rover. It was ritual, not routine. Sometimes the two people seemed to me as passionate and tenacious as a pair of spies – lovers clinging together and hiding for a cause – and sometimes they made me feel like a spy.

I supposed they worked in the same office, that he drove her home, and that on Fridays – using the heavy traffic as an excuse – they made this detour in Battersea to spend an hour together. It was their secret life, this love affair. The parked car seemed to say that it was kept secret from everyone. It was probably the only hour in the week that mattered to them.

Tonight they were kissing. The spring air was mild, and the trees in the park were blossomy, pink and white, palely lit by the lingering sunset and the refracted river light that reached past the embankments and cast no shadows. We had high clouds, mountains of them, all day, and every new leaf was a different shade of green. Spring was magic in London; the city seemed to rise from the dead. There was no winter freeze, as in some northern cities, but rather a brown season of decay and bad smells. April brought grass and flowers out of the mud and healed the city with leaves and made it new. This was my second spring, and it was, again, a surprise.

The couple in the car helped my mood. I set off for Winfield House, whistling a pop

song I had been hearing, called ‘Dancing on the Radio.’ I was wearing new clothes. I had done my exercises and had had a shower and a drink. It had been a good day. In my cable I had summarized in a thousand words yesterday’s by-election; a month ago I had correctly predicted the outcome. I had borrowed Al Sanger’s Jaguar, and as I drove up Park Lane I turned on the radio and heard a Mozart concerto, the one for flute and harp. It gave me optimism and a sense of victory. I had solitude and warmth, and all my bills were paid, and I had a general feeling of reassurance. Everything was going to be all right. It began to rain lightly and I thought: Perfect.

When I came to the iron gates of Winfield House, four armed men appeared. I opened my side window and heard noises from the zoo, grunts and bird squawks. The men examined my invitation and found my name on their clipboard, and I was waved in. The security precautions reminded me once again that the Prime Minister was coming. I was by now excited at the prospect of meeting her.

I was announced by the doorman. Ambassador Noyes sprang forward when he heard my name. He seemed nervous and rather serious. Everett Horton and Margaret Duboys were there, and soon after, more guests arrived. Most of them were nice American millionaires who lived part time in London. There was also a journalist, and an American academic and his wife, and a novelist – he was fortyish and talkative, delighted to be there, and his smug square face was gleaming with gratitude. One group of guests had already been more or less herded into the green room to admire the wallpaper.

‘I think it’s best if we sort of gather in there,’ Ambassador Noyes said. This was an order, but he said it uncertainly, which was one of the reasons he was called No-Yes.

He was the shepherd, and Horton and I were the sheepdogs, and the nondiplomatic people were the sheep. The idea was to keep them from straying without making them panic or feel penned in.

Horton whispered, ‘Not a word about interest rates tonight, please.’

Then he hurried to the far end of the room and began helpfully pointing at the wall.

The wallpaper in this room was famous. It was Chinese, four centuries old – or was it five? – and had been found in Hong Kong by a recent ambassador, who had had it restored and hung. It was the color of pale jade, and there were pictures of birds and flowers on it, hummingbirds and poppies and lotuses. It was such a classic item, it had the look of a Chinese cliché, even to the predictable pagodas. It had been so carefully repainted, it looked like a copy – it was too perfect, too bright, not a crack or a peel mark anywhere – and every figure on it was primly arranged in a pattern of curves. The pattern was old and slightly irregular, but the surface design had been scoured of its subtlety with the fresh paint, and there was not an interesting shadow on it

anywhere. You scrutinized it because it was famous, and then you were disappointed because you had scrutinized it. Such interesting wallpaper, people said; but if it had been less famous it might have looked more interesting. And I felt that the prettier wallpaper was, the worse the wall it hid.

It had another feature, this wallpaper – it inspired the dullest conversation: How old was it, and was it really paper, and how much had it cost?

It made me want to change the subject. I was talking with Debbie Horton, telling her the correct version of a story about me that had been going the rounds. A few months before, I had attended a fund-raising dinner and at my table I had spoken to a man whom everyone present had been referring to as 'Sonny.' Sonny was a tall rosy-cheeked man with the subdued manner of a botanist or a handyman. 'What do you do?' I had asked. He became awfully flustered. 'Nothing much,' he then said, and was silent for the rest of the meal. Afterward, a smirking, sharp-faced woman said, 'That was Sonny Marlborough – the Duke of Marlborough, to you.' It was a good story, and, as President Nixon used to tell his aides with a sweaty little grin, it had the additional merit of being true.

Debbie had heard the gossip version – that he had said, 'What do I do? I'm a duke –'

Then I forgot everything. I couldn't think. I was looking at a young woman's back, and at her yellow hair, the way it came out in little wings over her ears, and the curve of her hip, a line, from where her small hand rested on her waist, to her knee, and the way her green dress was smooth against her thigh. I went weak, as if suddenly standing up drunk, and I felt lost in admiration and anticipated failure and the kind of hopeless fear in a flash of blindness that is known only to those who feel desire. I wanted to touch her and talk to her.

Debbie Horton was saying, 'You're not even listening to me!'

'I heard every word you said.' Insincerity made my voice overserious and emphatic.

'What are you looking at?' Debbie said.

A stir in the room saved me. There was a shifting of feet, the guests looking at each other and then at the door, which the Prime Minister and her husband were just passing through with the Ambassador and his wife. We fell silent, and the Prime Minister began talking in a loud friendly way about how much she liked the wallpaper.

'It's silk, of course,' the Prime Minister said.

This silent smiling mob at my end of the room was already tremendously impressed. This was how you talked about wallpaper!

The young woman had also turned to see the Prime Minister. She was about thirty; her face was bright with intelligence and a kind of shyness. She had a little smile of anxiety on her lips, giving her mouth a pretty pair of parentheses, and there was something lovely and unglamorous about her that gave her real beauty. Her dress was a simple one, but the neck of it was edged in lace. Her eyes were green, she had small feet, her skin looked warm.

No one spoke. The Prime Minister was being introduced, and most of us were beaming horribly at her in case she should look up.

‘I have a law degree myself!’ she was saying to one guest. She spoke in a hearty headmistressy shout.

Two steps took me nearer the young woman with green eyes, and I whispered, ‘We haven’t met.’

She smiled and looked toward the Prime Minister, who was approaching us.

I said in a low voice, ‘What do you think of the wallpaper?’

She laughed a little and said, ‘I like its lame uncertain curves.’

‘Flora Domingo-Duncan,’ Ambassador Noyes said, appearing next to her. ‘Doctor Duncan is currently doing research in London.’

‘On Mary Shelley,’ she said, with a hesitant bow to the Prime Minister.

‘Frankenstein!’ the Prime Minister shouted, and moved on. She had already put herself in charge of us.

I again wanted to touch Flora Domingo-Duncan. I could not think of anything to say to her. I needed time, and I knew I looked stupid and slow.

At this point, the Prime Minister’s husband came forward and was introduced. This man had been made into a celebrity by an English comedian, who had portrayed him in a popular farce as a sour-faced paranoiac in a cardigan, interested in nothing but drinking and playing golf. In this unlikely way he had become as famous as his wife, but something of a joke figure. I could see at once that the comedian had gotten him wrong. He was kindly, he was funny, and he had an easy laugh – a way of throwing his head back and braying his approval. He scowled and smiled; he was skinny and nimble; he had a very funny upper-middle-class drawl.

‘Is this your first time in London?’ he asked Dr Duncan.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I did graduate work at Oxford three years ago.’

‘I know who you are,’ he said to me. ‘You’re with the firm, aren’t you? Yaaas’ – and threw his head back and laughed – ‘you see I’ve done my homework! I read that sheet of names they gave me – all your little biographies.’

This was surprising candor – dinner-party homework was never mentioned – but it made me like him. He saw it properly as both a joke and a duty.

I said to Dr Duncan, ‘You have a lovely name. Flora Domingo-Duncan.’

‘My mother is Mexican.’ She was polite and patient, and I wondered whether she was bored by me.

The Prime Minister’s husband said, ‘Yes, some of these Mexicans actually do have blond hair.’

‘My mother’s hair is brown,’ Dr Duncan said.

We were getting nowhere. I wanted to be alone with her. I wanted to meet her later in the week for dinner. Maybe she had a boy friend?

Horton joined our little group; he introduced a lady by the name of Bloomsack, then whispered to me, ‘That was a wonderful cable you wrote today on the by-election.’

‘Thanks, coach,’ I said, and for some reason thought of the old Rover car parked on the corner of Alexandra Avenue and Prince of Wales Drive, and the two people in it, kissing, and I stepped nearer to Flora Domingo-Duncan.

Horton was whispering behind me, ‘If the subject of interest rates comes up with the PM, I’ll give you a signal. I’ll need some back-up.’ And he went away.

I was watching Dr Duncan’s pulse at her neck, an almost imperceptible flutter between a branch of bones.

Mrs Bloomsack said, ‘I was at Carrington’s last night,’ to the Prime Minister’s husband.

‘Yaaas,’ he drawled warily, tipping his head back.

The woman had equivocated – ‘Carrington,’ she had said, not ‘Lord’ or ‘Peter.’ Lord Carrington was the Foreign Secretary.

‘Wasn’t he the man,’ Dr Duncan said, ‘who settled the Rhodesian issue?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Bloomsack.

‘No, no, no,’ the Prime Minister’s husband said. ‘I’ll tell you who did that. I’ll tell you who brought both sides together and did most of the preliminary work.’ And he turned and with an owlish face and immense pride he said, ‘It was that lady over there. That’s who it was. Yaaas.’

He was smiling fondly at the Prime Minister. She saw him and smiled back. She had a hard pleasureless smile and slightly discolored teeth, and her skin was like flawed dusty marble. Her face was vain, unimpressed, and attractive, and her body square and powerful. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, and there was a sacklike heaviness in her, a willfulness and impatience that gave her an aura of strength. Even her hair looked hard. In every way she was the opposite of her husband.

Ambassador Noyes stared at me. He was with the Prime Minister and I think he wanted help. I pretended not to see him.

‘I’m interested in your research on Mary Shelley,’ I said to Dr Duncan. ‘I reread Frankenstein recently. “Misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.” That poor monster.’

‘Frankenstein’s the doctor, not the monster,’ Mrs Bloomsack said, seeming pleased with herself.

‘Yaaas,’ the Prime Minister’s husband said, lifting his sharp nose at the woman.

‘Most people get it wrong,’ she said.

‘Do they?’ the Prime Minister’s husband said. ‘I had no idea.’ He shook his head at her and in a gentle way watched her stumble. Did he know how funny he was?

I said, ‘I have a theory that this novel represents a fear of childbirth. Mary Shelley’s mother died giving birth to her, there had been several miscarriages in her family – or Shelley’s family – and she wrote it when she was pregnant. Can’t Frankenstein be seen as an expression of the fear of giving birth to a monster or a corpse?’

‘A lot of people have that theory,’ Dr Duncan said. She tossed her loose gold hair and smiled at me. ‘But she wasn’t pregnant, and anyway is Doctor Frankenstein the father or the mother of the monster?’

‘Does it make a difference?’

‘We are being summoned to dinner,’ the Prime Minister’s husband said, and stood aside to let the ladies pass.

‘As a feminist, I think it makes a big difference,’ Dr Duncan said. ‘You don’t believe me.’

‘No, no, it’s not that,’ I said. ‘Feminists are usually such scolds. But you’re so nice.’

‘I’m not nice,’ she said lightly. ‘I’m selfish, I’m bossy, I’m opinionated, and I’m a scold, too. My students are afraid of me.’ She was grinning, giving her mouth the pretty parentheses. ‘And I’m impossible to live with.’

‘You’re full of surprises,’ I said. ‘When I asked you about the Chinese wallpaper you said, “I like its lame uncertain curves.” That’s pretty funny.’

‘It’s a quotation,’ she said, ‘from Charlotte Perkins Gilman. You don’t know her story, The Yellow Wallpaper?’ She smiled at my ignorance. ‘She was another impossible woman. It was very nice to meet you.’

And I felt, furiously, that she was saying good-bye to me.

The table was set for sixteen people. Flora Domingo-Duncan was sitting at a distant corner, between Everett Horton and Mr Sidney Bloomsack. The Prime Minister was halfway down the table, next to Ambassador Noyes, and her husband was just across from her. I saw Dr Duncan speaking to Mr Bloomsack, who had the tanned white and brown head of a yachtsman in his sixties – he radiated money and virility – and I became uneasy and thought how funny and spirited Dr Duncan was, how self-possessed and surprising. She was pretty, she was bright-eyed, she was frank. I had nothing to offer her, but again I felt the sad urgency of desire for her.

It is customary at such a dinner to speak to the person on your immediate right. This was Mrs Fentiman, wife of the New York publisher, who was in London in a take-over bid for the English firm of Howletts.

Mrs Fentiman said, ‘I can’t think of anything to say to the Prime Minister’s husband.’

‘Ask him about Zimbabwe or North Sea oil,’ I said. ‘Don’t mention interest rates or unemployment.’

But I was watching Flora Domingo-Duncan, and my heart ached when I saw how far away she was. I was in an undertow – I was very far from shore.

The meal was served. It began with pheasant consommé and sherry, and then we were served Navarin de homard. The main course was escalopine de veau Normande, with

broccoli and dauphine potatoes and a gâteau des carottes aux fine herbes, and the wine with it was Pinot Noir 1977. There was red salad and deep-fried Camembert, and dessert was bombe glacée with fresh strawberries and cream, and I had three glasses of champagne.

I ate, I listened to Mrs Fentiman, and instead of watching the Prime Minister to see how she was getting on with the Ambassador, I stared hopelessly at Dr Duncan, trying to catch her eye. She never once glanced in my direction. Several times, while watching her, I saw her laugh – she had a loud energetic laugh. I loved her laughter, and yet it made me feel rueful. Why was I sitting so far from her?

There were toasts – to the Queen, to our President – and then speeches. The Ambassador's, made with notes, was a simple affirmation of Anglo–US friendship; the Prime Minister's speech was an eloquent and graceful rejoinder that had the effect of making Ambassador Noyes seem as if he had asked an intelligent question – he looked surprised and pleased. At their best, the British can be very courtly, and the Prime Minister made us seem that night as if we were her dearest friends.

It was one of the best meals I had ever eaten; this was one of the most distinguished guest lists imaginable; Winfield House was one of the loveliest private homes in Regent's Park; the speeches were uplifting; and all that beautiful wallpaper! But I would have swapped it all for an hour of privacy with Flora Domingo-Duncan.

'And you're a pretty fussy eater,' Mrs Fentiman said. She was still talking! 'You hardly touched your meal. Are you one of these food cranks?'

'No. I just got very strange when I was in the Far East,' I said.

She did not smile. She twitched a little. I hated women who looked like men.

'The State Department has a lot to answer for,' I said.

Having successfully bewildered Mrs Fentiman, I scrambled to get near Dr Duncan, nearly knocking down Mrs Bloomsack. Dr Duncan was smiling at me, seeming to invite me over to join her! Just behind me, I heard Horton clearing his throat, and then he threw his arm around me.

'The word is that she wants to hear about interest rates. We'll have an informal session over coffee. You're going to like her. She is really an amazing human being.'

I said, 'I don't know anything about interest rates.'

'Improvise,' Horton said.

‘It seems to me that’s what all the economists are doing,’ I said. ‘Improvising.’

‘That’s kind of a cute opening – why don’t you use it on her? She’ll appreciate it.’

Flora Domingo-Duncan had joined Margaret Duboys and Debbie Horton and the distinguished Sidney Bloomsack, who, I could tell, had taken a shine to her. He was a rich, idle man – he would make everything easy for her. He looked like the sort of man who had had every dollar and every woman he had ever wanted. It was awful to think that she and I might never have a chance to talk, and she might go off with S. Bloomsack thinking he wasn’t a bad guy – generous, at least. Some women in the company of vain and ridiculous men look vain and ridiculous themselves, and some look like hookers. Dr Duncan looked serene. She had the most relaxed shoulders. She was listening, giving nothing away.

‘Hurry up,’ Horton said, squeezing my arm. ‘She hates to be kept waiting.’

I heard a loud sudden burst of laughter and recognized it as Dr Duncan’s. What a wonderful laugh! What had Bloomsack said that was so funny? They were all laughing now, over there, the millionaires, the academic, the journalist, the novelist. They were having a swell time.

My whole life had been like this. Working in second-floor offices in Africa, in Malaysia, in London, I had looked out the window and seen lovers strolling on the ground, or people smiling at nothing; I had seen the casual way that people met, the way they chatted, how they held hands. And I was always doing something else. My work was my life. I had never been idle. I was always a little late for an appointment, a little overdue with bills, a little behind in my work, and there was always someone in the next room with a problem for me. I was seen by everyone as a master; but no one was a more put-upon servant, keeping regular hours and at the mercy of anyone at all who demanded to see me.

It seemed wrong to like solitude so much, but I had always lived in empty rooms, and craved privacy, because I was overworked. And now, like any servant, I saw how completely I had surrendered and how much I had wasted. I had been praised, but praise was not enough; I was well paid, but what did money matter? I had never had the time to spend it. It seemed that I had always been a bystander, watching life through a second-storey window and expected to talk about the wallpaper. Love was for after work, but I was always at work.

This woman had woken in me desire, and a realization of my own envy, cowardice, loneliness, and disappointment – I couldn’t say despair. But I began to think that I did not deserve her, which is one of the gravest sins of all, self-doubt. What a lovely name, what a ringing laugh, what a pretty mouth!

Watching Flora Domingo-Duncan, and thinking about myself, I was taking a chair in front of the Prime Minister.

‘The Prime Minister was wondering about interest rates,’ Horton said to me.

‘I was told,’ she said in a hectoring, too-loud voice, ‘that you could quite easily put me in the picture. Just how long are your rates going to go on rising?’

She was known for her directness. I sat down and began explaining, and again I heard the sudden laughter of Dr Duncan. She was with that other group – the ones drinking port and cognac, who would go away thinking what a wonderful time they had had at Winfield House with the Prime Minister and those powerful London Embassy people. We were drinking water. We were talking in abstractions. From my point of view the evening was a failure, because I wanted for once to be on the far side of the room. The only thing that mattered was human happiness; however distinguished or powerful we looked here in this corner beside the expensive fake-looking wallpaper – the Prime Minister, Horton, Ambassador Noyes, and myself – we were merely temporary people, actors with small speaking roles, reciting lines that were required of us: we knew what an uncertain thing power was. We were talking about the world, and pretending that we had a measure of control over it, but it was mostly bluff. Or did we really believe that this concern was more important than that laughter?

We had done with interest rates and grain sales and the Polish debt, and then a silence fell.

To fill it, I said, ‘Prime Minister, the unemployment rate in Britain strikes some of us as a serious matter. Have you any –’

‘No one is more concerned about it than I am,’ she said, with the force of someone who believed she might soon lose her job. ‘I take it very seriously indeed. But the long-term projections are encouraging, and we believe it will be substantially reduced in the next quarter.’

‘I don’t see how,’ I said, and I looked for Flora Domingo-Duncan across the room.

I had, through inattention, been too skeptical. This aroused the Prime Minister, and she began to speak in a venomous way. ‘There are a few vicious, self-serving, greedy, desperate, power-seeking –’

Flora Domingo-Duncan was leaving.

I said, ‘It seems hopeless.’

‘Don’t you believe that for a moment,’ the Prime Minister said; she had never looked

plumper, and her plumpness was like armor.

What had I started? They were all staring at me! Was it unemployment? Oh, God, I thought, and I saw that the hardest thing in the world for me to do would be to leave that little group. I had to stay, to give the Prime Minister a chance to say her piece, and to satisfy the Ambassador and Horton. But there was no time, and in the swing of that silence I stood.

‘Excuse me.’

And turned my back on them.

She was in the large, wood-paneled foyer, speaking to the Bloomsacks. Mrs Noyes was saying good night to the Fentimans. Chauffeurs were being summoned from the rain and darkness.

‘Do you need a ride home?’ I said. ‘I have a car.’

‘The Bloomsacks are taking me,’ Dr Duncan said. ‘But thanks anyway.’

I said, ‘We didn’t have much of a chance to talk.’

‘I saw you talking to the Prime Minister,’ she said. ‘I mean, you were actually talking to her. That was –’

‘No, no!’ Mrs Bloomsack exploded. ‘Mine is the dark blue one!’ Pumping her arms, this short stout woman crossed to the cloakroom, where a blank-faced servant held the wrong coat in both of his hands.

‘May I get your coat, Flora?’ Mr Bloomsack said.

‘It’s a green cape,’ she said.

And then we were alone, Flora Domingo-Duncan and I.

‘I want to see you again, very much, for a meal – or anything.’ I was talking fast.

‘That would be nice.’ She looked at me with curiosity, and her gaze lingered in a tipsy way. She had the slightly out-of-focus look in her eyes of someone who wears contact lenses.

‘What’s your telephone number?’

She told me. I scribbled it on my wrist in ballpoint.

‘Call me,’ she said.

Mr Bloomsack was returning with her cloak. His teeth were gleaming. He was pushing toward me.

‘When?’ I said, with such insistence that she smiled again.

‘Tonight,’ she whispered, and then turned so that Mr Bloomsack could help her put on her cape.