Flora Domingo-Duncan said, ‘I used to be a mess,’ and laughed, and said, ‘It was my mother. So I went to graduate school in California and put three thousand miles between us. God, am I boring!’

‘You’re not boring,’ I said.

‘I don’t want you to get sick of me.’

‘I’ll never get sick of you.’

We were naked in bed on our backs and speaking to the ceiling.

‘Anyway, I was a wreck,’ she said, and clawed her blond hair away from her forehead. ‘I had a shrink. I wasn’t embarrassed, I just didn’t want to talk about it, so I told people I was seeing my dentist. Twice a week! “You must have terrible teeth,” they’d say. But it was my mind that was a mess. Hey, why are we talking about my mind?’

Because during our lovemaking we had become very private and fallen silent. I thought then that no one was more solitary than during orgasm. We were resuming an interrupted conversation.

‘I like your mind,’ I said. ‘I like your green eyes. I like your sweet et cetera.’

‘Good old e.e. cummings.’ She was expert at spotting quotations. We agreed on most things, on Wuthering Heights, To the Lighthouse, Dubliners, and Pale Fire; on Joyce Cary, Henry James, Chekhov, and Emily Dickinson. We shared a loathing for Ernest Hemingway. That night we had gone to the National Theatre to see La Ronde, by Arthur Schnitzler; and then I made omelettes; and we went to bed, and talked about La Ronde, and made love. But literature was as crucial as sex – we were getting serious. Liking the same books made us equals and gave us hope; we had known the same pleasure and experience. Taste mattered: Who wanted to live with a philistine or to listen to half-baked opinions? Everything mattered. And there was her Mexican side, a whole other world. It was not exactly revealed to me, but I was aware of its existence. In all ways, with Flora, I seemed to be kneeling at her keyhole. She loved that expression.

It was spring, and the windows were open. The night-sweet fragrance of flowering trees was in the air.

‘This is luxury,’ she said. She pronounced it lugzhery, because she knew I found it funny, like her comic pronunciation of groceries, grosheries.

‘But I have to go,’ she said.

‘Stay a while longer.’

‘Just a little while.’

She lived off Goldhawk Road, at Stamford Brook, in two rooms. It was there that she worked on Mary Shelley, with occasional visits to the British Library. Her time was limited. She had only until July to finish her research; then back to the States and summer school teaching. She worked every morning, and so it was important to her that she left me at night.

‘I have to wake up in my own bed,’ she said. ‘Otherwise I won’t get anything done.’

I admired her enterprise and her independence, but I was also a bit threatened by them – or perhaps made uneasy, because her life seemed complete. She had a Ph.D., an Oxford D.Phil., and was an assistant professor at Bryn Mawr. She was presently on a traveling fellowship, working on a biography of Mary Shelley. She was beautiful, and I never wanted her to go. She had never spent a whole night in my bed.

I said, ‘I wish you needed me more.’

‘That’s silly. You should be glad I’m independent,’ she said. ‘I can see you more clearly. Don’t you know how much I like you?’

I liked her. I craved her company. I liked myself better when I was with her. The word ‘like’ was useless.

‘But I need you.’

‘There’s no reason why you have to say it like that,’ she said, smiling gently and kissing me. ‘Anyway, you have everything.’

‘I used to think that,’ I said.

She said, ‘It’s scary, meeting someone you like. Friendship is scarier than sex. I keep thinking, “What if he goes away? What if he stops liking me? What if … what if …?”’

‘I’m not going anywhere.’

‘But I am,’ she said. She could be decisive. She kissed me and got out of bed and dressed quickly. And minutes later I was watching her car pull away from Overstrand Mansions and already missing her.

I had thought that once we were sexually exhausted we would be bored with each other, and yet boredom never came, only the further excitement at the prospect of my seeing her again. Every succeeding time I was with her I liked her better, and discovered more in her – new areas of kindness, intelligence, and passion. I lusted for her.

She was not romantic. She was gentle, she was practical, and a little cautious. She had warned me against herself – she told me she was selfish, bossy, opinionated, and possessive. She said, ‘I’m impossible to live with.’ But later she stopped talking this way. She said I made her happy. I had known her a month, but I saw her regularly – almost every evening.

We had made love the first night we met, after the Ambassador’s party, at two in the morning, in distant Stamford Brook. We made love most evenings, always as if we were running out of time. It became like a ceremony, a ritual that was altering us. Each occasion was slightly different and separable, and fixed in my memory. So this continued, both of us burning, both of us expecting it to end. But we did not become bored – we were now close friends.

I had had lovers, but I had never had such a good friend, and for this friendship I loved her. I didn’t tell her – I was afraid to use that word. The sex was part of it, but there was something more powerful – perhaps the recognition of how similar we were in some ways, how different in others, how necessary to each other’s happiness.

Love is both panic and relief that you are not alone anymore. All at once, someone else matters to your happiness. I hated to be parted from her. But she was busier than I was! She had just until July to finish her work, and then it was back to the States and her teaching. We lived with a feeling that this would all end soon, but this sense of limited time did not discourage me. I found myself making plans and, in an innocent way, falling in love with her.

It reassured me. I had never thought that I would fall in love with anyone. Then it seemed to me that living with another person was the only thing that mattered on earth, that this solitary life I had been leading was selfish and barren – and turning me into a crank – and that Flora was my rescuer. Part of love was bluff and fumbling and drunkenness. I knew that – but it was the pleasant afterglow of moonshine. The other part of love was real emotion: it was stony and desperate; it made all lovers shameless; and it did not spare me. I was alive, I was myself, only when I was with Flora, and that was always too seldom.

I could not see her on Friday nights. She did not say why, but Friday was out. I had a colleague – Brickhouse, in the Press Section – who told me that after he got married he and his wife decided to give themselves a night off every week – it was Wednesday. Neither could count on the other's company on Wednesday, and neither was expected to reveal his or her plans. They weren't married on Wednesday night. Of course, most Wednesdays were the same – a meal, television, and to bed – in different rooms that night. That was the agreement. But some Wednesdays found Jack Brickhouse on his own and Marilyn inexplicably elsewhere; on other Wednesdays it was the other way around. This marriage, which was childless, lasted seven years. Brickhouse said, 'It was a good marriage – better than any I know. It was a good divorce, too. Listen, my ex-wife is my best friend!'

I used to wonder if for Flora it was that kind of Friday, keeping part of her life separate from me. It certainly disturbed me, because I was free most Fridays. I spent Fridays missing her, thinking of her, and wishing I were with her. Perhaps she knew this – counted on it? On the weekends when I was duty officer I did not see her at all.

I had asked her about her Fridays once. I said, 'I get it. It's the night you go to your meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.'

I could not have been clumsier. But worry, self-pity, and probably anger, had made me very stupid.

She said, 'Do you have to know everything?' And then, 'If it is Alcoholics Anonymous I'm hardly likely to tell you, am I? A. A. is very secret, very spiritual, and no one makes idiotic jokes about it. That's why it works.'

Maybe she was an alcoholic? But a few weeks later she told me that her father had had a drinking problem, and I knew somehow that she didn't.

Still, every Friday night I seemed to hang by my thumbs. On two successive Fridays I called her at her apartment, but there was no answer. Was she in bed with someone else and saying, 'This is our day off'? I wondered whether I could live with her and allow her her free Fridays. But of course I could – I would have allowed her anything!

And from this Friday business I came to know her as someone who could keep a secret. She did what she wanted; she stuck to a routine; she would not be bullied. So, not seeing her on Fridays, I learned to respect her and to need her more, and it made our Saturdays passionate.

She never stayed the whole night with me, not even on the weekends. On the nights when I went back to her apartment she woke me up and always said, 'You're being kicked out of bed.' It was so that she could work, she said. She was determined to finish her Mary Shelley research on time.

On one of those late nights, when I was yawning, getting dressed sleepily, like a doctor or a fireman being summoned at an unearthly hour – but I was only going home to go back to bed – she said, ‘By the way, I’m busy next weekend.’

‘That’s okay,’ I said. But the news depressed me. ‘What are you doing?’

Her beautiful silent smile silenced me.

That weekend passed. I missed her badly. I saw her on the Monday, and we went to the movie Raging Bull. She hated its violence, and I rather liked its Italian aromas – boxing and meat-balls. I took her home in a taxi, but before we reached Stamford Brook she kissed me lightly, and I knew she had something on her mind.

‘Please don’t come in,’ she said. ‘I’m terribly tired.’

Well, she looked tired, so I didn’t insist. I had the taxi drop me at Victoria and I walked the rest of the way home. It was pleasant, walking home late, thinking about her. And it did not seriously worry me that there was a part of her life that she kept separate from me, because when we were together we could not have been closer. I had never met anyone I liked better. It became a point of honor with me that I did not discuss her absent Fridays or that weekend. It was the only weekend she asked for – there were no others.

Enough time had passed, and we were both committed enough, for us to think of this as a love affair. Flora must love me, I thought, because she is inspiring my love. But so far, the Embassy knew nothing about it.

This was just as well. Not long after Flora’s mysterious weekend, we were given a talk on the antinuclear lobby in Britain. The feeling was fiercely against our installing nuclear missiles in various British sites. Every party hated us for it – the Labour Party because it was anti-Soviet, the Liberals because it was dangerous, the Conservatives because it was an iniquitous form of national trespass. We knew it was unpopular. We had five men gathering information on it. They had the names of the leaders of the pressure groups; they had infiltrated some of these groups; they had membership lists. They filmed the marches and demonstrations and all the speeches, whether they were at Hyde Park or at distant American bases in the English countryside, where the more passionate protestors chained themselves to the gates.

One of the films concerned a group calling itself Women Opposed to Nuclear Technology. It was not an antiwar movement: they weren’t pacifists; they did not advocate unilateral disarmament. Their aims struck me as admirable. They wanted Britain to be a ‘nuclear-free zone’: no missiles, no neutron bombs, no reactors. And they were positive in their approach, giving seminars – so the boys on the third floor

said – on alternative technology.

This film showed them marching with signs, massing in Hyde Park, and demonstrating at an American base. The highlight of this weekend of protest was an all-night vigil, which won them a great deal of publicity. They didn't shout, they didn't make speeches. They simply stood with lighted candles and informative posters. It was a remarkable show of determination, and one of the women in the film was Flora Domingo-Duncan.

I sat in the darkness of the Embassy theater and listened to the deadpan narration of one of our intelligence men, and I watched him take his little baton and point in the general direction of the woman I loved.

'This sort of person is doing us an awful lot of harm,' he said.

I smiled, and loved her more.

Did she know she was on film?

'No,' she said, 'but I'm damned glad you told me. The others will be mad as anything. Why did you tell me?'

'It's every citizen's right to know,' I said. 'Freedom of information.'

She laughed. She said, 'Now you know about my Friday nights. But I thought that if I told you about it you'd have to keep it a secret.'

'It wouldn't have mattered,' I said.

'Something else to think about. You're busy enough as it is.'

It never occurred to her that I might disapprove of her agitprop because I worked for the US Embassy. It was nothing personal. She had acted out of a sense of duty.

I said, 'If I say I admire you for this – acting on your beliefs – will you think I'm being patronizing?'

'You're very sweet,' she said. She wrinkled her nose and kissed me. 'Let's not talk about atom bombs.'

The matter was at an end. Everything she did made me love her more.

We went on loving, and then something happened to London. In the late spring heat, the city streets were unusually full of people – not tourists, but hot idle youths who

stared at passersby and at cars. Battersea seemed ominously crowded. They kept near the fringes of the park and they lurked – it seemed the right word – near shops and on street corners. They carried radios. There was a tune I kept hearing – I could hum it long before I learned the words. ‘Dancing on the Radio,’ it was called.

We start the fire

We break the wall

We sniff the smoke

Which covers all the monsters

Look at us go

Dancing on the radio,

Hey, turn up the volume and watch!

Turn up the volume and watch!

And there was a chanting chorus that went, ‘Make it, shake it, break it!’ It was a violent love song.

The youths on the streets reminded me of the sort of aimless mobs I had seen in Africa and Malaysia. These south London boys looked just as sour and destructive. They lingered, they grew in numbers, and their song played loudly around them.

Flora called them lost souls. She said you had to pity people who were unprotected.

‘Then pity the poor slobs whose windows are going to be broken,’ I said.

‘I know. It’s a mess.’

I said, ‘All big cities have these little underdeveloped areas in them. They’re not neighborhoods, they’re nations.’

Flora said, ‘They scare me – all these people waiting. They’re not all waiting for the same thing, but they’re all angry.’

Many were across the road from Overstrand Mansions. They sat at the edge of the park; sometimes they yelled at cars passing down Prince of Wales Drive, or they walked toward the shops behind the mansion blocks and paced back and forth. There was always that harsh music with them.

‘If this was the States and I saw those people I’d be really worried,’ Flora said. ‘I’d say there was going to be terrible trouble. But this is England.’

‘There’s going to be trouble,’ I said.

She looked at me.

‘We’re getting signals,’ I said.

The boys on the third floor, the ones who had filmed Flora, were now showing us films of idle mobs.

Then the trouble came. It did not begin in London. It started from small skirmishes in Liverpool and Bristol, and it grew. It was fierce fighting, sometimes between mobs – blacks and whites fighting – sometimes against the police. The sedate BBC news showed English streets on fire. It did not have one cause; that was the disturbing part. But that also made it like the African riots I had seen. There was trouble in a town and all scores were settled – racial, financial, social, even family quarrels; and some of the violence was not anger, but high spirits, like dancing on the radio.

When it hit London there were two nights of rioting in Brixton, and then, spreading to Clapham, it touched my corner of Battersea. One Sunday morning I saw every window broken for a hundred yards of shopfronts on Queenstown Road. There had been looting. Then the shop windows were boarded up and it all looked uglier and worse.

I had been at Flora’s that night. We heard the news on her bedside transistor, and on the way home I had seen the police standing helplessly, and seen the running boys and the odd surge of nighttime crowds.

I was then deeply in love with Flora. I had been looking for her, I knew. She said the same, and this well-educated woman quoted a Donne poem that began, ‘Twice or thrice had I loved thee, / Before I knew thy face or name …’ Butin finding her I had discovered an aspect of my personality that was new to me – a kinder, dependent, appreciative side of me that Flora inspired. If I lost her it would vanish within me and be irretrievable, and I would be the worse for it.

She was different, but that did not surprise me. All women are different, not only in personality but in a physical sense. Each woman’s body is different in contour, in weight, in odor, in the way she moves and responds. It is possible, I thought, that every sexual encounter in life is different and unique, because every woman was a different shape and size, and different in every other way. But what about men?

Flora said, ‘I’ve stopped wondering about that. “Men” is just an abstraction. I don’t

think about men and women. I just think about you and me.'

We were at my apartment one Saturday, sitting on my Chinese settee from Malacca. I wanted to tell her I loved her, that sex was part of it, but that there was something more powerful, something to do with a diminishing of the fear of death. It was an elemental desire to establish a society of two.

'Let's talk about love,' I said.

'Folie à deux,' she said. 'It's an extreme paranoid condition.'

There was an almighty crash. I ran to the balcony and saw that a gang of boys had stoned a police car and that it had hit a telephone pole. The police scrambled out of the smashed car and ran; the boys threw stones at the car and went up to it and kicked it. Then I saw other boys, busy ones, like workers in an air raid scurrying around in the darkness, bringing bottles, splashing the car. They set the car on fire.

I shouted. No one heard.

Flora said, 'It's terrible.'

'This is the way the world ends,' I said.

She hugged me, clutched me, but tenderly, like a daughter. She was afraid. The firelight on the windows of my apartment came from the burning car, but it looked more general, like the sprawling flames from a burning city. And later there were the sounds of police sirens, and shouts, and the fizz of breaking glass, and the pathetic sound of running feet slapping the pavement.

We sat in the darkness, Flora and I, and listened. It was war out there. It seemed to me then as if we had been transported into the distant past or future, where a convulsion was taking place. How could this nightmare be the here and now, with us so unprepared? But we were lucky. We were safe and had each other. And, in each others' arms, we heard the deranged sounds of riot and, much worse, the laughter.

Past midnight, Flora said, 'I'm afraid.'

'Please stay the night,' I said.

'Yes. I'm so glad we're together. Maybe we have no right to be so safe. But nothing bad can happen to us if we're together.'

Her head lay against my chest. We had not made love, but we would sleep holding each other and we would keep death away.

She relaxed and laughed softly and said, ‘You didn’t really think that I’d leave you tonight. I’m not brave –’

‘You’re brave, you’re beautiful,’ I said, and I told her how every night that we spent together was special and how, when it came time to part, it hurt and made me feel lopsided. I told her how happy I was, and how many places in the world I had looked for her – in Africa and Asia – and had practically given up hope of ever finding her, though I had never doubted that she existed. All this time the windows were painted in fire, and I heard Flora’s heart and felt her breathe in a little listening rhythm. Tonight was different, I said, because we could spend the whole night together – it was what I had wanted from the moment of meeting her. And what was so strange about liking her first of all for her hair and her green eyes? That’s how I had recognized her! She had been funny and bright and had made me better, and this nightmare world did not seem so bad now that we were together, and –

‘To make a long story short,’ I said.

And then she laughed.

‘Isn’t it a bit late for that?’ she said.