

Tony McKibbin

Waiting

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A very close and long-term friend and I were talking one evening when I visited him in his house up in Strathpeffer, a village in the Highlands, north of Inverness. He was an architect who used to work in Edinburgh but moved further north and started designing eco homes in the region. One afternoon a woman walked into his office in the village and said that she would like to design a holiday eco home for herself and her husband. She explained that they already owned a number of properties in the area, but none of them would she have liked to live in. She said that she was still based in Edinburgh along with her husband and two young kids, but they were looking to move permanently to the Highlands. As she talked he thought she seemed familiar, and he recalled from years before in Edinburgh someone with the same name, and also, perhaps, the same face. Was it really her?

I asked who, and he wondered if I remembered someone he had talked about around fifteen years earlier. She was a young woman who had given him Reiki a couple of times, and after the second visit he made to her house where the Reiki took place, and after he had returned home, he phoned her saying that during the second session he had become slightly aroused. She said that it wasn't that common for people to get excited by Reiki, though a few people she admitted had got aroused when she had given them a massage.

A week later he phoned her again and asked if he could get another Reiki session, and Alison said perhaps it wasn't a good idea, but did say she would like to meet him for a cup of tea in a cafe. She would have then (like him) been about twenty seven, and she had warm, royal blue eyes, blonde hair with a hint of red, and a smile that seemed naturally to please. She said she was flattered that he found her sexually attractive, but also slightly dismayed that he was somehow not quite responding to the spiritual side of Reiki. She also said that only a few weeks before she had started seeing someone, and so she thought it would not only be unprofessional but also personally unethical if she offered another Reiki session to someone who got excited in the process of her doing it.

My friend suspected if he had told her this a month or two earlier, said to her he had got aroused during a Reiki session, she might not have given him any more Reiki, but

he might have been able to start a relationship with her. As he repeated the story, I remembered vaguely a few of the details, and he said that though he never talked about her again to me, nevertheless he often thought about her thereafter. He would frequently play through his mind what would have happened if he had taken the Reiki lessons only a couple of months before.

Owen of course had girlfriends over the years, but he never quite felt he could commit to anyone. There he was at forty two still occasionally thinking of a person from many years before, wondering what could have been while enjoying his life without consequence. He said to me that evening as we talked about the woman who came into his office a couple of weeks earlier that he knew it was an essentially idle thought, but it perhaps gave him a strong sense of non-commitment: the notion that if she could have been the one then he ought not to devote himself to anyone else unless someone came into his life who could obliterate that sense of regret. I knew when he said this to me that he was worried he might be mad. Over the years, after I got married and had children, after Maggie and I bought the house in North Berwick when our first child was born, I would often ask him whether he was likely to settle down, and he would usually grimace and say perhaps one day. He had never before explained that this was one of the reasons why he had never done so. He might have at the time talked a lot about her, but I didn't know that for years after he was thinking about her also.

What made the story that he told me especially strange was that he could not say for sure if the woman who came into his office was actually the very woman from fifteen years earlier. The name was the same, the face familiar, but of course it was a professional encounter; how could he ask her if she was the woman who had given him Reiki all those years before? He also realised that in not asking her he was so much less brave than he had been fifteen years earlier when he phoned to say how he felt during the session. I said it was hardly normal that a woman for whom he had strong but unrequited feelings and who had shaped his life for so long was someone whom he might not even recognize now, especially if she hadn't greatly changed. He said that was partly what had always made her interesting to him. He never quite felt that he saw her; that he instead much more felt her presence. When she walked into the office he wasn't sure when he had a strange feeling in his body whether it was actually her or someone invoking again that presence without actually being her.

The conversation we were having was taking place in the front room of our house in North Berwick. It was during the coldest month for many, many years, and earlier before Owen had arrived Maggie had made up a fire that was now in the late Saturday afternoon giving off a fierce heat that flushed both our faces. As was often the case with Owen he talked in a complicated manner, trying to express what was both on his mind and in his soul, and I would often think that he was the most naive of my friends, yet with the most sophisticated thought process. I was even surprised that he had managed to make a good living as an architect for fifteen years, as if his complex thinking would have been too troublesome for the practicalities of his profession. Yet in his work and in his life he always made sense: he wasn't neurotic or confused, illogical or imprecise in his thinking, and indeed his own convoluted thoughts during the conversation that day set in motion a few of my own.

Around the same time that Owen had his encounter with Alison, I was in India for six months, mainly working in a language school in Mumbai, but I had taken a couple of weeks off in the middle of it to lie on a beach over the Christmas period in Goa. It was there I met someone from Canada and had my first and only example of love at first sight. Lianna was wearing a wrap around her bikini bottoms and a bikini top, and was darkly tanned, with her hair clearly bleached by the sun and her eyes bright green against her tan. She was coming towards the bar when I first saw her, and she ordered a Mango Lassi as I watched from a nearby table. I didn't talk to her that afternoon, but instead observed her as she would swim in the sea and then return to her sun lounger in front of the cafe. The following day she returned to the same spot, and she had lunch in the cafe at the same time as I did.

We started talking, and she explained she was travelling around the south of India, and that she wanted to take a couple of weeks out to lie on the beach. We talked, we walked, we swam and we ate, and after three or four days we got close and the rest of the trip shared my room together. I was in love and so was she, but when we parted we insisted that we would never see each other again: that we would protect the memories. I remember when I got back from the trip talking to Owen about my brief affair and he told me about his encounters with Alison. However while within a few months I had all but forgotten about that beautiful Israeli in Goa, Owen had clearly never managed to get Alison out of his mind.

Yet the strange thing was that after we talked, after he left and I had dinner that evening with Maggie after putting Ewan and Liam to bed, I had an overwhelming feeling of loss for that woman whom I barely knew in terms of time together, but for whom the feelings were unequivocally strong. I thought about how I felt initially with other girlfriends after that trip to Goa, including Maggie. It was as though before travelling to India when I was approaching my late twenties I wanted to meet not so much the love of my life but have the emotional experience of my life: I wanted to feel very strongly yet without consequence, and met Lianna. After that I seemed somehow happily resigned to a feeling less strong but more long-lasting, and it was around that time I suppose I started looking for a wife, and around three years later when I was thirty that I met Maggie.

With Maggie it was not at all an immediate attraction. We met through mutual friends, and found, over a month or two of seeing each other only occasionally, that we had the same expectations of life. We wanted to marry, wanted to have only one child, wanted to continue pursuing our careers (she taught literature at the university in Edinburgh; I taught philosophy through in Stirling), wanted to build a huge library, and take time to travel, even with our son or daughter. It was as though we ignored the intensity of concentrated feeling people often have when they first meet each other, for a diluted look into our own future. A few months before I had read an article about physiological responses to falling in love, where the honeymoon period, the infatuation, intoxication, and desire would help create the grounds for that long lasting trust and commitment. I felt I had all these feelings with Lianna in two weeks and abruptly stopped them when she went back to Israel and I went back to Scotland. I never had them at all with Maggie; almost didn't want them, and I suspect our getting

together was emotionally a little like an arranged marriage. Yet I found after Owen's visit increasingly wondering where these intense feelings can go, if it was true that we set these feelings in motion like a biological promise. Would such feelings become part of our unconscious and resurface later, rather like a trauma never properly dealt with?

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It was about a month later and I was still thinking a lot of this encounter years before, and it was strangely one that I had hardly spoken of to Owen at all. I recall when we had talked so much of Alison, I did mention Lianna, but almost as a counterpoint to Owen's preoccupations. I think I offered it as an example of intense but requited feelings, where I believed his lingering thoughts about Alison may have been because nothing had happened. So I decided I would go up to the Highlands and talk to him about my own recent thoughts and feelings, telling Maggie I fancied being alone for a few days, and knowing that one of the great things about our marriage was that we understood each other's need for creative space. She presumably thought that, though I was going up to visit Owen, I would also devote much of my time to working, writing an article I needed to finish, in one of Owen's eco cottages that he would rent mainly in the summer, and that Maggie and I, and the kids, would sometimes stay in during the out of season months. However, as she no doubt envisaged me working away, I saw myself bringing up memories from many years before as Owen would no doubt talk once again about the woman he thought might be Alison.

As I arrived in the mid-evening, Owen had prepared dinner and lit the wood burning stove. As we ate a dish of baked vegetable and bulgur wheat I asked him whether there were any further developments to his story. He smiled and said indeed there had been. About a week after he had last been down, the woman came to see him again, and this time she wore around her neck a necklace that he was sure he remembered from years before because at the time he had asked what it was made of. He didn't mention it; didn't say that he was sure he remembered her from years earlier, but he felt as they talked about various things including New Age's relationship with ecology, that he was transported back in time. Yet what he found strange was that he had none of the feelings for this woman that he had in the past, that even if it was her, he didn't still love her.

It was a few days after that when the woman got in touch again and asked if he would like to take a look at the eco homes they owned, and that would give him some idea of what she was looking for, though of course he wanted her and her husband's place to be much more original and distinctive. However, as he was arriving he got a text saying that she couldn't make it, but that, if he wanted to look around anyway, he could ask the cleaner to show him the place. He felt no disappointment in her absenteeism, and instead curiosity when a woman in her late twenties answered the door and asked him to come in to the home where he was supposed to meet the woman. Whatever his perception of a cleaner happened to be, this person didn't match it. He probably expected a much older woman, tired with a life of cleaning up other people's mess, but instead saw in this woman much that he believed he saw in Alison all those years earlier and that he thought was somehow missing now in the person he thought was almost certainly her. The cleaner's name was Louise and as she showed him around the house she said she didn't really have much to say about it

and he would probably be able to observe more than she could tell him. Instead, and very quickly, they started talking about themselves, and as she made a cup of tea in the kitchen, with the electricity supplied by solar panels on the roof, she started talking of her past after he asked how someone with an accent that sounded perhaps Cornish, had ended up in the north of Scotland. She explained it was a long story, and maybe he didn't want to hear it. He was intrigued.

She said that for several years she was going out with a surfing coach in the area; that she knew he wasn't always as faithful as she would wish, knew there were frequent temptations, but somehow rationalised that whilst he was attracted to other women, he was in love with her. However, when she became pregnant with his child, he tried to persuade her to have an abortion and she refused. A week later he left her after emptying their bank account. Someone had told her he went to the west coast of Mexico, and was teaching surfing there. She told it in a matter of fact way and showed no sign of distress in the telling, and he asked how long ago this had happened. She said it was two years before, and a few months afterwards she had moved up to the Highlands. He assumed she had relatives in the area, but later in the conversation, as they were drinking a second cup of tea in the kitchen of the eco home, she said that it was an impulse, or perhaps an instinct: that she didn't know anybody in the region at all - though her parents when she was a child had once hired a cottage for a week in Aviemore.

He said to her he remembered a conversation he had had years before with a friend (namely me), where they talked about the difference between impulses and instincts, recalling that they had discussed the notion that instincts are deep decisions that involve one's body, one's mind and one's soul, while one's impulses are where we only act with but a part of ourselves. While initially it might have seemed like an impulse to move up to the north of Scotland when she saw there was somebody looking for a cleaner for eco homes which included accommodation, and where she quickly decided to come, maybe it increasingly felt like an instinct. It seemed like a wonderful place to bring up her daughter. She had never used her degree (in economics and marketing), anyway, and always liked life to be as simple as possible - no matter the chaos with her surfing ex.

As Owen told me the story I could see that he was falling in love with this woman, and I asked him if anything had happened between them. He smiled and said no, but he hoped it would. I asked if he was sure he didn't still have feelings for Alison, and found in the asking a curious sense of absurdity. Was I asking him whether he still had feelings for the memory of a person from the past, or whether he had feelings for the woman in the present that may or may not have been Alison? He said that no, he had no more feelings for Alison at all.

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As I drove back down the road I wondered whether I was beginning to have feelings again for Lianna, as she seemed to be in my thoughts a lot in recent months. I arrived home in the early evening, pulled the car into the drive, and walked into the house with wary and exhausted trepidation. I didn't want to see Maggie at all, and even seeing the boys wasn't compensation enough for the fear of the domesticity that

awaited me. Yet as I kissed Maggie briefly on the lips and gave her a hug, I knew I loved her, felt that she was someone with whom I could easily to spend the rest of my life with, but there was still this yearning for a life elsewhere.

The next morning, while working, I went on line and looked for Lianna's details on Facebook. In the picture she was clearly much older than when we had met, but also instantly recognizable. I looked at the handful of friends that were next to her profile, and while of course this was only a small number of the many she no doubt had, I felt from the pictures of the eight friends and the interests that she listed, she was less domesticated than I happened to be. She was still doing scuba diving and hiking, and some of the people in the pictures looked like they might have been people she met doing these activities. I tried to recall what we talked about during the two weeks we were together, and though she listed one of her hobbies as reading on the Facebook page, I am not sure if we ever talked of books at all. I remember it as a mainly sensual, active fortnight, with much touching, love-making, swimming, and lying in the sun, with the talk mainly casual and intermittent. I could recall only a couple of occasions where we talked reminiscently about our pasts, and abstractly about our view of the world, and maybe it was one of these conversations that I knew that when we parted there was no reason for us to see each other again.

Lianna had explained that her grandparents had come to Israel after the war, after the creation of the Israeli state. Before that they had been in the Soviet Union, and came to Israel expecting a good life and indeed, materially at least, had exactly that. Her parents were both given great educations, and her and her brothers also. But she always felt there was a vacuum in her family's life that she assumed was related to the Shoah, and how many relatives they had lost there. She was constantly told how hard life was, even though for her and her friends they always had food, clothes, money to spend. Sometimes she would say that maybe the Palestinians' lives were the tough ones, and her grandparents would say that was not real suffering. I told her of my own upbringing, which was rather more tranquil: I was brought up on a small Hebridean island, and had neither much conflict in my family's past nor during the time I was growing up. I tried to imagine crofts on other parts of the island being taken over by people of a different faith and culture. I couldn't easily do so, just as I couldn't imagine my grandparents losing most of their relatives in a death camp. I could not easily think of a past full of horrors and a present constantly being impinged upon by a people that my own had displaced.

It was out of this conversation that a day or two later a more abstract one was offered. We were talking about the idea of having a home, and I said I thought I would always live in Scotland, and she said she believed she would be much more peripatetic. We talked of how both the Scots and Jews were in many ways wandering people; that after the Highland Clearances many Scots went to Canada and elsewhere, and we talked of the difference between Scotland and Israel. I said it was true that while Scotland by many people's definition had been, and still was, colonized by the English, it had always been there as a brute geographic reality. Maybe lots of Scots didn't feel autonomous, but they could nevertheless identify with the mountains, the lochs and the often arid landscape. What could the Jews identify with, she mused, a promised land that required the forced removal of another people? Imagine if after the clearances Jews instead of sheep were on the land: Is it better to be autonomous yet

usurping, or oppressed but feel the land is yours? Maybe that is why she thought she would keep travelling, and I might stay put: that she didn't really believe in Israel as her home; I believed fundamentally that Scotland was mine.

Curiously we never had another serious conversation after that, as though Lianna was someone who could argue well and deeply, but only if the subject involved a problem that she was addressing personally. The rest of the time we ate, swam, walked, danced and had sex. When I would compare her to Maggie, it was as though my tactile life had disappeared with Lianna. It wasn't that Maggie and I didn't hug and cuddle, but I don't think either of us ever felt alive to the other person's touch as a yearning. It seemed so strange that for two weeks Lianna and I wanted to touch each other all the time and then assumed that we would never touch each other ever again after we parted. I think now that it resided in our optimism, in our belief that if we could find such an encounter once then we could easily find it again. However, I believe all the other relationships I have had were closer to the one with Maggie, but without the trust and companionship: encounters without consequence. But then didn't I think that the liaison with Lianna was without consequence also, and yet fifteen years later the memories kept coming back, and with a force that made my body sometimes lightly ache?

For the next couple of weeks I felt like a usurper in my own home, felt as though my family were strangers to me as I found I was increasingly flashing back to a fortnight in my life that I had lost, and it was as if talking to Owen about his experiences with Alison, and his meeting with Louise, I could see his life was in front of him and mine behind me, and yet for years I am sure I reckoned it was the reverse. It was then that I decided two things: that I wanted to go up once again to talk to Owen, and perhaps even meet Louise, and secondly contact Lianna through Facebook. One was easier than the other; but contacting Lianna may have required little more than a bit of typing, but it also contained within it the possibility that I might destroy my life with Maggie. I decided I would go up and visit Owen first, and asked Maggie if she would be okay about me once again going north to do some work. She agreed, but in return she wanted to visit friends in Edinburgh the following weekend. Our relationship was so civil and organised, so respectful and mutually agreeable, that I knew I would be unlikely to find anyone else for whom being apart was as easy as being together. Quite often one of us would go off to a conference with the other one looking after the children, and while we had many friends in common, there were other friends that were almost exclusively hers or mine (like Owen): we shared a life together in a very fundamental way, yet many aspects of our existence we shared barely at all.

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The first afternoon I arrived I said to Owen that I thought I would need to talk. He said we could go for a walk and then come back and eat, and if I still hadn't talked myself out we could open a bottle of whisky. He seemed happier than perhaps I had ever seen him, and I asked if he were happy with Louise, assuming that they had started seeing each other. He said he was happy, but he could hardly say with Louise since he had only seen her a couple of times since that initial meeting, and nothing physical had happened between them, but thinking about her, knowing he would see her again, created a sense of well-being that he couldn't quite justify; didn't even need to justify.

It was then I started to talk of Lianna: saying, initially in response to his own comment about well being, that for some reason this fling from many years before was beginning to cause me pain, and yet why, so many years later? As we walked round a back road next to a hamlet not far from Strathpeffer, and came out by the town and walked through the woods behind it, so we wondered whether his well-being and my own dissatisfaction at that moment lay in his failure to get on with his life all those years before as he kept thinking of Alison, and mine in being able to forget all about Lianna only for her to return to me years later as if a crisis initially un-confronted.

To compare a two week liaison in Goa with an actual trauma may seem strange, but I did know that I had never felt like that before or since. I asked him if that was how he had felt about Alison, no matter the minimal contact. He agreed, and mentioned a couple of films, *Citizen Kane* and *Eyes Wide Shut*. He mentioned that in both a character does little more than see somebody: in *Citizen Kane* the character says a day hasn't gone by when he hasn't thought about the woman he saw; in *Eyes Wide Shut* the wife reckons she would have left her family for this man she sees merely sitting at a nearby table. Who knows how an event impacts on us, no matter how irrelevant it may seem.

I told him that with Lianna there were many days that went by where I didn't think of her at all, and I didn't go into the relationship with Maggie thinking that there were unresolved emotional issues with this woman whom I had been with for two weeks. There were a number of lovers and girlfriends between Lianna and Maggie, and so why was it coming back so strongly now? I told him that I had looked up Lianna on Facebook, but that I had resisted asking her if she would accept me as a friend. He said it was interesting: that if I did get in touch with Lianna again now it would be about the same length of time that he had not seen Alison, assuming the woman who walked into his office that day was actually the same one. He laughed, saying here we were, two men talking about two women, one of whom might not be the person he thinks she is, and the other one a woman I hadn't seen in fifteen years. Yet as we ate a light dinner at his, he said what matters is that we understand our own emotions in relation to the people in our lives. He mentioned friends of ours, a couple who got married around the time Owen met Alison and I was in Goa. We both agreed that they never seemed to have any strong feelings for each other, didn't seem to talk very much or show much tactility, but it worked. It functioned very well in the real world of mortgages, stressful jobs and young children. Were we both people who wanted to leave in a dream he wondered.

After dinner, as he opened a bottle of good whisky, I said I didn't feel like a dreamer: I saw the two week liaison with Lianna for what it was, and saw other people and settled down with rather than for Maggie. I laughed and said maybe *he* was a dreamer; *my* attempt at living in the real world was exactly that: very real. Yet there I was fifteen years later yearning for someone from long past. I said what I meant was that dreaming to me indicated perhaps a procrastinator: one who refuses to live in the world because of hopes in an abstract realm or an event that one couldn't get over. I insisted to Owen I wasn't criticising him; how could I, maybe he had gotten over Alison more successfully than I had recovered from Lianna. Maybe there is a place for giving someone all the mental space they require before you can say that they no longer colonise your sub-conscious. Alison was vital to his consciousness for so long

that at the same time I suspected Owen had worked her through his sub-conscious too. But what I had done with Lianna; buried her inside myself and believed I was so easily continuing my life? As I offered this to Owen he said that there was a comment by a writer he liked. "We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come." But, he added, maybe it was still more complicated than that. Maybe we do live other lives but on less conscious levels, and that he thought I might have been living another sub-conscious existence with Lianna, and it was only now that this sub-conscious life had returned to consciousness.

It would have been aftermidnight by then, and we had almost finished the bottle of whisky, and perhaps our thoughts were rambling but our insights were vivid. We both believed we had made sense of our feelings in a new way. I asked Owen again about Louise, and he said that he felt she was somehow the emotional reincarnation of Alison, laughed, and said we had definitely been drinking too much whisky. I said I wasn't so drunk that I didn't want him to say more, and he said he thought love had two sides beyond the conscious: the sub-conscious and the cosmic, and that they were really two sides of the same cupidic coin. He reckoned he had been thinking of these things a lot recently, that this woman who may or not be Alison coming back into his life, meeting Louise, and my comments now on Lianna, helped them crystallize. He reckoned that we do only live one life - that he didn't believe in reincarnation - but don't we also live other lives imaginatively all the time, and sometimes these imaginative lives needn't even enter consciousness: they may be part of our dreams, part of our actions. For example, he said, pouring the last of the whisky in our glasses, and threatening to open another bottle, while I had been with Maggie for years it was only recently that I had been consciously yearning for this other life with Lianna, but had there perhaps always been in my relationship this longing for another life, and yet is this longing an acceptance of the reality of one's own? He told me that I might not remember, but he did, that sometimes I would say to him things like: "Maggie is what I need because she grounds me." "What I like about Maggie is that she always lives in the real world." "Maggie is someone I can see my future with." You would often talk about her, he said, as if you wanted to remove all your possible lives, and felt Maggie was the one who could do so. Yet if I am correct, he added, we have three lives emotionally: our actual life, our sub-conscious life and our cosmic life, with the latter two difficult to differentiate. One person's sub-conscious desire is another's cosmic insistence. In some way they become part of our existence even if they are only very briefly part of our lives. He mentioned again the examples from the two films.

I had never quite heard Owen talk like this, and while I knew by the books he had on the shelves in the sitting room he read far more than might be expected of a person chiefly involved in a visual art form (and Owen always insisted in seeing architecture as an art), I had never seen him bring his thoughts to life in this way before. Usually he would offer the stray comment, but never so clearly an articulated line of personal reasoning. It made me want to meet Louise: wanted me to see if he had found someone for whom the three aspects he talked of had come together in the one person. I said to him what he needed to do was not open another bottle of whisky but to put the kettle on. If he was going to continue I needed a more sober head on my shoulders than the one that was beginning to drift off the point.

He said one of the advantages of having an unrequited love is that it gives a lot of opportunity for meditating upon one's own feelings, without these feelings being hampered by the necessity of sharing them. He laughed and said it sounded like something the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa might say. I told him I had read *The Book of Disquiet* years before, but that it hadn't really spoken to me. He said it had been talking to him for years, and went over to the bookshelves and quoted from it. "To join in or collaborate or act with others is a metaphysically morbid impulse. The soul conferred on the individual shouldn't be lent out to its relations with others." Owen said he didn't quite believe that anymore, but for years it helped him have strong feelings without enacting them. Or rather of course he occasionally had lovers, but none of them eclipsed his feelings for Alison, until perhaps now, where it seemed Louise was doing exactly this.

He wondered how I might have felt during those years if I had the brief affair with Lianna in India, and then, apart from brief encounters, was alone in the years after. Would I also have then fallen for Maggie, or for someone else, more *lucidly*. He offered the word with emphasis, as if knowing that it was an unusual word given the context. Alison he supposed was always a conscious trauma, while Lianna became a hidden one, and that now it had decided to return. He mentioned a book by William Styron where the writer talks of his own depression; and that later in our lives an event from much earlier that we thought we had resolved returns to throw us into despair. Perhaps this semi-requited love was exactly that. Where his unrequited feelings for Alison became an event that he confronted and allowed to become part of his conscious way of living in the world; had I buried Lianna in my sub-conscious and here she was coming back? Could I really fall in love with someone so quickly and expect to get over it without consequences?

Owen apologised for what might have sounded like a smug tone: that there he was for years self-consciously dealing with a loss, while I refused to confront mine. Who knows, he said whether he hadn't wasted much of his life thinking of someone he had never even kissed, where I had an intense sexual experience and several relationships since. No, he said, he wanted to point out the differences more than anything else. He thought that perhaps Alison offered him everything by offering nothing: he turned her into an idealised figure but consequently knew what he wanted from someone, and simply kept searching. Imagine, he said, if Lianna was the person I had been searching out, but I didn't know it because I didn't think about it: I was living far more emotionally pragmatically than he was: I was living in what most people would call the real world. Was I attending to the sub-conscious and the cosmic?

I knew I had always been sympathetic to Owen's perspective, and knew it chiefly through how I would defend him whenever describing to people how he lived. When they would ask whether he had a girlfriend, whether he was married, had kids, and I would say no, they would often instantly judge him as a dreamer, but though I rarely justified Owen as well as he was justifying himself that evening, I always expressed my need to resist the platitudes they would throw upon him. Was it partly because sub-consciously I knew he understood feeling better than I and many other people did - or at least understood it differently?

By then it was around three in the morning, and I noticed, as I was thinking, that Owen, his head tilted towards his shoulder, had fallen asleep. He looked in that sleep happy, the dreamer dreaming, and I remember him saying to me on a couple of occasions that he never slept badly, never had bad dreams, where I would often wake up with a startle without ever quite understanding where the feeling came from.

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When I returned back home I began to feel like I was living amongst strangers. I increasingly believed that I was important to Maggie and the kids' lives but not at all irreplaceable. Could another man who helped put the kids to bed, who earned a good wage and knew how to hug his wife not replace me? Our love making was dutiful more than passionate, and perhaps always had been, our habits generated contentment but not much energy, and I would look at Maggie and wonder if she could be equally happy with someone else? It was one evening, about a week after I had been up at Owen's, after dinner and after Ewan and Liam were in bed, when I asked her if she could ever see herself with anyone else. She replied that she couldn't, and I wondered if in her reply there was a sense of resignation or contentment. I think if anybody had asked me a few months before whether my marriage was one or the other I would have said the latter, yet it was a question I had never asked myself, and now that I was doing so I thought it might be more the former. She added that she knew she would be happy if she had work she believed in, a husband she cared about and kids she could love. She said this sitting in a chair opposite me in the sitting room, but came over and sat on the couch next to me as she said it.

And yet as she sat next to me, caressing my cheek and saying she loved me, I knew I had felt more comfortable talking to Owen the week before. I very much cared for Maggie too, but in that moment, when I should have been able to express so much about myself, I believed I was expressing so little as I stroked her hair and kissed her. I said I loved her, but it felt like an automatic response, a gesture as familiar as changing the gears in the car.

And so it was the next day that I sought an invitation from Lianna on Facebook, and so it was that evening I received a reply. She was so happy that I had got in touch after all these years, saying that sometimes we don't know how meaningful our life has been in certain moments until it returns in some form or other. She didn't say much more than that, but said we should try and Skype each other and have a proper talk: she said she was living in New York, was enjoying her work and wasn't unhappy. She said she was working as a sports writer for a magazine. She also gave me her mobile number, and a couple of days afterwards I texted her saying I was free the following afternoon: Maggie was taking Ewan and Liam to her parents nearby.

We talked for a couple of hours, and Lianna explained that she never married, never had children, and was now in her late thirties and wondering if that is what she should be looking for, but also knowing that she hadn't met someone with whom she would want children. I wanted to say would she have wanted them with me, but it was such an absurd non-sequitur, predicated on so little, that I said I had two, but perhaps with the wrong woman. I immediately felt I had betrayed Maggie, and added: no she was the right woman for the kids; maybe I wasn't the right man for her. By the end of the

call, curtailed by the sound of the key turning in the door as Maggie and the kids came back, I knew I had been emotionally unfaithful to Maggie, but had I perhaps not been subconsciously unfaithful to her for years?

8

Over the next few weeks Lianna and I talked several times on Skype, and she said that she was going to be in Zurich to cover an athletics tournament: would I want to meet her somewhere in Europe? I said I would need to think about it, need time to work out how it would be possible to leave Maggie and the kids for a couple of days, but said that I would definitely like to meet up. After speaking to Lianna I thought in this meeting there would be an astonishing pragmatism of emotion and movement, as if emotional betrayal and international travel were so easy. Earlier in the day I had received an e-mail offering cheap valentine flights from a low-coast airline, as if it wasn't enough to take our partner anymore to an expensive restaurant in our home city; that we are expected to fly off and wine and dine for an entire weekend. It was interesting that as the relationships seemed to be ever more fragile (and none more so than my own), so the hyperbolic gesture of love became ever bigger. As I checked out these cheap flights, I was thinking not of going somewhere with Maggie, but wondering if I could find a cheap flight around the same time to one of these romantic cities and meeting up with Lianna.

Before doing so I phoned Owen and said I had to talk to him, but first of all I wanted to know whether there were further developments with Louise. He said that they had started seeing each other, that they were perhaps even in love, he felt almost instantly with her daughter, and that he did actually feel as if he had been waiting half his life for her, no matter how vicariously through Alison. Was this woman who had hired Louise, the Alison from the past, I asked? He still didn't know, and somehow didn't want to find out. He liked the idea that she *might* be. I said to him that I was thinking of seeing Lianna in some city in Europe, and he believed that if I didn't then it was likely my sense of moral decency would become strong resentment towards Maggie, maybe even towards Ewan and Liam. Get in touch with your subconscious whatever name she happens to go by, he joked, but also said, almost as an afterthought, but of course you have a family.

I thought about this for a while before emailing Lianna and saying I had found a cheap flight to Berlin. I wondered whether Maggie might be better with another man, even the children with another father, and thought was that not exactly what was happening with Owen, as he took over the role of the man who had run off? Lianna replied saying it would be great to meet in Berlin, and I went ahead and booked, wondering what excuse I would make for Maggie. Or rather what lie I would have to tell. Instead what I did was I sat down one evening and explained that I had been back in touch with the person I had spent two weeks with many years ago, and that she was in Europe and that I wanted to see her. Maggie sat there with a look of shock on her face and yet said she wasn't surprised. She had always thought there was an aspect of me that was withdrawn from her: perhaps she was almost relieved that this was probably the reason. Yet in telling Maggie about these feelings somehow killed the *potential* in them, removed the sense of complicity in the action, and I had a feeling that when Lianna and I would meet up we wouldn't sleep together, yet I also knew

that I still had to go. I told Maggie I didn't know what I felt but that it was as though my body needed to experience another possibility. I asked her if she felt the same, and she said no, she didn't think so. There was a colleague in the department who sometimes seemed to make overtures, but generally she felt complete: two children, a job she loved and a husband, yes, well a husband she said. At that moment I held her as I stoked her hair again, but this time without any sense I had a thought in my mind that I couldn't express to her if I so wished. She said to me that she was glad I was going: she felt when I got back she would know whether she had a husband who had always loved her or only thought he did.

9

Lianna and I arranged to meet in a cinema café not far from Zoo station, and as I walked in I scanned the room to see if I could see her. As I did so someone came up behind me and I turned and saw it was Lianna. I was nervous, but it was the nerves of a stranger meeting another stranger, and as we sat down we talked of many things, but I believed throughout the conversation that all we were doing was catching up, apart from about twenty minutes where we talked once again about our respective countries. I had asked whether she was still reluctant to live in Israel, and she said that maybe she couldn't return now permanently: that it would be too traumatic. She probably escaped the country because she didn't think it was dealing with its own historical sub-conscious, and now here she was probably doing something similar with her own feelings towards her past. It seemed to echo comments Owen and I had made, but contained within it a political dimension missing from Owen and me where most of our complications were more clearly our own. I thought back to the conversation with Maggie and wanted to be talking to her, sitting in our lounge, watching the way the open fire would bring a flushed glow to her face, and felt a mixture of admiration and surprise that Maggie could live as simply as she claimed, want so easily and straightforwardly a family life. As I looked at Lianna's skin I noticed it was rougher than Maggie's, though both Maggie and Lianna were the same age, and it was a skin hardened by sun and outdoor activities, as Maggie's had stayed young through bookishness and a librarian pallor. We arranged to have dinner that night, but after the meal we did no more than kiss each other on the cheeks and said maybe we would meet for lunch the next day. As I kissed her I felt a roughness, and recalled the softness of Maggie's skin.

As I arrived back to my hotel room I couldn't stop sobbing, and it wasn't that I was mourning my lost youth, or my missed opportunities, but more the years that I had been with Maggie and she had felt I was often somewhere else. I thought of Owen, who never harmed anybody in the conscious manner in which he dealt with a thought he couldn't get out of his head, until he met someone else who easily replaced the figure on his mind. I had another thirty six hours in Berlin, but I didn't want to see anybody, and instead thought constantly of Maggie and the kids. I also realized that in all the time I had known her I had never before allowed Maggie so much space in my mind, and again I found myself occasionally withholding tears that I suspected she would for the first time receive when I returned back to Scotland, a country I could return to as easily as I could return to the person waiting for me.

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