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**CLAPHAM**

IN ALL THEIR YEARS TOGETHER, Elsa and her husband had never fought. Allen didn't have that in his nature and, over time, Elsa had removed it from hers. Allen had made a career of examining facts, identifying patterns and drawing conclusions and, although he was endowed with humour and compassion in equal measure, he could suppress both when required. He had excelled, he had achieved, in almost every sense, and Elsa wasn't one to argue with his deliberate, sometimes cutting, assessments. But she did today and, as she walked through the hotel lobby to the street, she felt not a sea change in their marriage but certainly a repositioning of the pieces on the board. While she had long been her own woman, Elsa could count the number of times in the last thirty-two years that she had behaved with so little regard for her husband—zero.

As Elsa made her way toward the taxi stand in front of the hotel, her right heel clipped the curb and she pitched forward into the street. She caught herself in the physical sense, her leg snapping out to prevent herself from falling. She caught herself mentally, too, in the way that the near avoidance of disaster—here, tumbling headlong into a busy street—can bring one into a more complete awareness of oneself. As Elsa smoothed her skirt and looked down to inspect the heel of her shoe, two things became clear that an instant before were only lurking on the outskirts of her mind: one, she and her husband had had their first fight, and two, she—a woman of mature years, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a successful and now retired ophthalmologist—was about to travel across a foreign city to have coffee with a man she had loved, lived with and abandoned nearly four decades earlier. If she were Allen, if she were inclined to examine the facts, analyze the patterns and draw conclusions from her morning ... but she wasn't Allen, and, as the taxi driver opened the door for her, she stepped inside and said all that she could think to say in that moment:

“Clapham, please.”

Day had broken through fog and chill, as it so often does here in fall. Where on certain days in July or August the heat could swirl at dawn and the humidity could set a person to sweating by breakfast, an autumn day follows a more palatable progression of cool to warm to cool. Elsa was pleased to have found it in London as she remembered. After years of living in a place that knew only the heat of high summer, she breathed once again with pleasure the city's cool air. She pulled her sweater across her shoulders as the taxi raced south from Mayfair to the river and on to a section of the city usually reserved for the recently graduated and the boisterous: not, perhaps, for a pair of one-time lovers now in their sixties. But it all seemed luxurious that morning, the day growing into itself, the taxi across Vauxhall Bridge, the Thames beneath her washing along its banks, dividing a city in its quest to reach the sea.

Elsa's younger self would have waited for a bus or run to the nearest underground station, sprinting always the final steps to the platform for fear of missing a just-departing train. But she had grown not only older but also wealthier through Allen's logic and her own endeavours, a practice of her own, built up over years of hard work and then sold to a doctor in his early thirties, an age better suited for the running of a business. In London now, she and Allen were starting the grand tour they had discussed from the time they were fledgling husband and wife. They were eating at the restaurants where they'd long hoped to dine, buying tickets to West End shows they'd sworn to see, and having left their grown children behind in America, they were also reacquainting themselves with one another, the decades of work and parenting changing now into years of quiet retirement spent in each other's company.

And in this new beginning, they had fought, and Elsa had left in a taxi to meet Max. The meeting was not in response to the fight, but rather the source of it, with Elsa and Allen taking the obvious sides in such an exchange. Only they were, for Elsa and Allen, not obvious sides. In their marriage they had not borne jealousies, and they had not stood in each other's way. But this morning they had done both, and Elsa left and did so with two pangs in her heart: that of wounding Allen, who for more than three decades had given her no cause to do so, and that of pursuing of a past lover.

"What is the point of this?" Allen asked as Elsa gathered her sweater and handbag and strode to the door of their room. "What is the point?"

"I can't say," Elsa said.

"You hope to reconcile with this man?"

“I can’t say that, either.”

What she couldn’t say was what she believed: that one does not make amends at so great a remove in time, but one may, she hoped, make something, if only—keen as she was to disguise it—to assuage her long-held sadness. It was a sadness that had become evident that summer when Max turned up as a guest at Allen’s retirement party. Allen and Max had, as it happened, been business associates for more than twenty years. They had not had direct contact, which is why Elsa had not known of their relationship. They operated through intermediaries, but the one had benefited from the other, and each, in his way, had grown independent with wealth. Elsa would have expected her husband to be content at having reached such a station in life, yet Allen had shown himself something different entirely that morning in their hotel room. As the taxi crossed over the Thames, she put her husband to one side. She loved Allen, but she was going—purposefully—against his wishes in order to follow her own, to a bistro she’d been invited to, for a coffee with someone she used to know. It seemed as it should that it had taken only a brief encounter that summer evening several months before for Elsa to arrange to meet Max in London. He asked, she agreed, and then they went off on their separate ways into the humid night air. A plan had been laid, but Elsa knew it was too much to say that a plot had been hatched.

“Tell me again how it was,” Max said, leaning against the dark wood of the high-backed bench. “Please, tell me again. It has been many years, and my memory is not what it once was.”

He was, she noticed at once, quieter than she had expected. She had missed that at the party. She had, she saw now, missed much about Max. Life had not so much subdued him as had allowed him to retreat to a place where reservation could be considered a kind of close attention rather than a lack of interest. So with his manner, as with his appearance: the silver streak of hair, the creased skin around alert eyes, the refined comfort of a well-made and now well-worn blazer. He was not the man Elsa had abandoned, but neither was he now the man Elsa would have stayed for, and so was soothed the third pang in her heart: that she might not wish to return to Allen.

“Let me try,” Elsa said, as she leaned closer to the small table, the response to Max’s withdrawal from it. “But I can tell you it’s not my job to look back through the years for two people. Doing so for one is hard enough.”

John had left several weeks before, a rain-streaked morning the same as this. He said he was tired of everything in the East and needed to go back home, back to Iowa, where, he said, the world was recognizable and more easily navigated. He left in the way he had arrived almost a year before, in a flashflood of displacement, of dirty dishes and dirty clothes, scattered papers and books, a general disrupting of established order.

“Not now, Constance, not now,” Elsa said as she picked her way across the bedroom, shooing away the cat that John insisted on getting the spring before. “Our own mousetrap,” he had said when he walked through the door with Constance in a shoebox. He picked the name. He said it gave the mewling kitten purpose. “Just wait,” John had said, but Constance, despite all manner of encouragement, had yet to kill a mouse, and if her name rang true at all, it was in her unyielding search for affection.

“Not now: I’m serious,” Elsa said as she put the kettle on the stove and set about starting her day.

It hadn’t been like this when she first came here. It had been winter giving way to spring then. The trees and the flowers and the gardens along Main Street and throughout the city were in bloom, at odds with a typical New England March. The blooming gave the impression that, however beautiful the city may have been then, more beauty was to come in the months ahead. “This is where I’ll live,” Elsa had thought, feeling the city’s potential fill her, as she maneuvered her car into the small parking area behind the apartment building on Hines Street, *her* apartment building on Hines Street. She couldn’t imagine John in the apartment then. She hadn’t met him and wouldn’t for two years, but when she picked up Constance after having her tea that morning, it was impossible for her to see John anywhere but here. The apartment had molded to him, as he had to it, and now his presence lingered—her sheets rumpled as though he had slept there the night before, his auburn strands threading through her hairbrush. The apartment bore his stamp intrinsically, but Elsa was late again for class and there was no time for John.

And there would not be time for John later, not after that bus ride in the rain, her green wool coat speckled with raindrop remnants, a man she didn’t know following her off the bus at the stop outside the medical school building, a man asking to go along with her, a man she would invite to her apartment and a man who, within days, would help her move into his. Max wasn’t Elsa’s great love. He wasn’t her first love. He was something all together different, a man for whom one changes one’s mind, for whom one

changes the direction of one's life. Max was palpable in that way in the rain that morning. He, too, was a flashflood.

"I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to do with this," Elsa said.

The waiter had come and gone and returned with *café boules*, handleless, swimming pool-sized coffees for the two of them.

"Should I bathe in it?"

"It's something," Max said, clearing his throat or stifling a cough, "that's better drunk than washed in, but if you're inclined, I won't stop you."

He blew across the top of his coffee, a smile on his mouth as he did so, a welcome moment of levity in the early going of their meeting. There was an obvious disconnect between the story Elsa was reciting and the story she remembered, so much was clear to Max, but he meant what he had said: his memory was failing, and it was enough to hear a version of their story regardless of its relation to the truth.

"My daughter brought me here," Max said. "It was two months ago, not long after I arrived for what's become an extended visit."

"You have a daughter?" Elsa asked.

"There are moments when the fact still surprises me, but, yes, I do. Margaret's here studying political economy—an area I confess to know nothing about, it combining the two subjects in which I have the least interest. It was her mother who encouraged her, I assure you."

"And, yet, you've come and stayed here."

"Of course. Margaret is my only, and besides, why not spend the autumn here? You seem to be doing the same."

"For a while, at least. We leave for Paris next week. Then to Bruges, Amsterdam, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, and after that, well, I can't remember. To hear myself say that ... I don't know. It sounds so tedious."

"I told Margaret she should have gone to Paris. She's smart enough for the Sorbonne, and you know what she's gone and done here? Fallen in love with a poet. A poet. In London. I've told her this is the wrong city for that. Fall in love with a poet in Paris. Here, a musician or an actor maybe, but not a poet. But it's true, she is in love, and there's no arguing with that."

"And you're here to keep an eye on her, to vet this poet-lover?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, you certainly haven't come to swim in bowls of coffee."

"No, not that either."

“Then why?”

“I’m not quite sure. But I am—well, *we* are—getting older. No, that’s too soft: I am—*we* are—old. There can be no debating this. And if I cannot spend an autumn in London, then what can I do?”

Max arrived out of the rain more than in it. The rain had intensified in the time it had taken Elsa to get from her apartment to the bus stop two blocks east. The rain fell harder still as the bus crept toward her stop, but inside, in her seat beside the window, all was dry apart from the streaks of water on coats and along the floor. But that rain had settled in. It was a presence, not falling, and in that way, required nothing. No complaint, no stray thought, no worry. There was a woman in the seat in front of Elsa reading a paperback novel. When Max boarded the bus, water fell from his coat onto the woman’s open page.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Oh, my dear,” the woman said. “It’s nothing at all. I’ve been crying right through this one. What’s one more drop?”

Later, Elsa would remember that the first words she heard Max speak were an apology. He lived in debt, she thought when she was in her forties and took her children on a drive along Hines Street, telling them about her past—portions of it, at least. She was reminding herself of herself, rather than showing her children something of their mother. She had not told them about Max, but she imagined him—imagined the two of them—for an instant, and it was raining in her memory. She had been entering a new age then, too.

Max passed her and took a seat toward the rear of the bus. In truth, Elsa hardly noticed him. She sensed him as motion: the stopping of the bus, the walking of a stranger down the centre aisle, the sound of his steps progressing toward and then beyond her, the bus wheels turning again, a body settling into a hard plastic seat, the bus stopping again, Elsa rising and leaving, a person behind her, the sharp edge of the falling rain as she left the bus behind.

“I don’t know where you’re going, but I’d like to go with you,” he said. Elsa had not turned around and already he was speaking to her.

“I’m not sure that’s possible.”

“Why not?”

“For one,” she said, “I have no idea who you are.”

“I’m Max.” He held out his hand. “And now you’ll have to tell me your name.”

She knew she didn't have to do anything. She didn't have to respond, nor did she have to stop walking toward the medical school building and to the lecture hall where Professor Tamlin soon would begin speaking. She didn't have to. She chose to.

"Elsa. My name is Elsa."

"El. Sa." He spoke as though testing the sound of her name in his mouth, as though there were a way to say it to keep it safe, to keep it from breaking, to keep from losing it, as though a name could be lost the way one might lose one's keys or wallet, except that losing a name would mean losing it forever.

"Well, nice as this has been, I need to be getting inside."

"Of course," Max said. "It's just that I was hoping that wouldn't be the case."

And in that moment, the best-laid plans crumbled. Elsa changed course, and Max came along with her. She with him, as well, and when Professor Tamlin would have been ending his lecture, Elsa found herself arched-back and shuddering through the tail end of what turned out to be a long overdue orgasm.

"Margaret and I were here about two weeks ago with Vincent, the poet-lover, when a woman sitting just over there snapped her fingers at a waiter and called out, 'Garçon! Oh, garçon!' The waiter, of course, ignored her, such was the woman's rudeness—really, who speaks that way?—so she snapped again and again called out for him in a sing-song voice. 'Garçon, maintenant! Maintenant, garçon!' Still he ignored her, and after snapping and calling a third unanswered time, the woman swept her place-setting off the table, the food making a mess on the floor, the dishes and glass breaking and all that, and she looked at the waiter and said in this put-on Southern drawl, 'Now, boy, you'll have to come to me.'"

"And what happened then?"

"Nothing, actually. The waiter left her alone, and she sat surrounded by her mess. After a while, after all the other customers had been attended to, the waiter walked over, handed her the bill and asked her to pay the barman on the way out."

"And that was it?"

"It was. Except that I looked over and saw that Vincent had been scribbling notes from the whole episode. He showed me the poem a few days ago.

He calls it, 'Piece of resistance.' And, despite my misgivings about Margaret's falling for a London poet, the boy's rather good."

There were reasons to go and reasons to remain and reasons to delay, but in the end, Elsa left because Max wouldn't love a child she'd once held inside her, a child that didn't belong to him, a child that barely belonged to her. She wanted to be her own flashflood, to leave in a torrent and to linger as well. It was her turn, and what she came up with was a lesson in French grammar: the verbs for leaving. She said, in a flourish summoned with strength and an eye toward effect, that she was going to *s'en aller*—leave and not come back. As it turned out in London in an autumn farther into the future than she could have conceived when that flourish arose, she was destined to go back on her word. She had left, but she had returned. She came with a sadness in her chest, a sadness of youthful opportunities missed, a sadness that was dissipating in Max's presence, that was drowning in the coffee set before her.

In the café, in a seat across from Max, Elsa was pitching forward again. Only she wasn't falling. She was breaking her fall. And there was a fundamental difference there, a difference she could understand in her head and in her heart. She had left Max in January, and by the summer she had resumed her studies with the verve of someone making up for lost time. She earned her degree. She earned another on top of that. She trained. She was trained by others. She met Allen. She married him. They built a life a piece at a time. They became parents, and with the arrival of the children, the miscarriage with John was put in its proper place, the deep background of her memory, something to look upon not with regret but rather with the understanding that life pitches forward into busy streets, too, and that it does not always catch itself on the way down, but even then, it continues. She founded a practice. She sold a practice. She and her husband began a trip they'd planned for almost as long as they'd known each other. She'd met an old lover for coffee in London, and she was going to leave him there. She was going to leave him without a flourish and without the sadness that had taken his shape inside her and now had fallen apart and fallen out of her.

"There was a cat, too, wasn't there?" Max asked.

"There was. Constance. She lived another six or seven years after I left, but never did what she was bought for—never killed a mouse."

"And that, to you, is a disappointment?"

“There have been enough disappointments for me not to have formed an opinion one way or the other on the matter.”

“And this—you and I here—has this been a disappointment?” Max asked, running his hands along the edge of the table.

“No. No, it hasn’t.”

“Then may I ask—”

“I’m sorry, Max, but you may not.”

“—if it had been different—”

“It wasn’t, and it won’t be. We are getting older. We are old. You have said it yourself. And I will say this: There isn’t room for a question like that.”

Outside the café, Elsa turned on the phone she and Allen had bought on arriving in London. She found a message Allen had left not long after she’d boarded the taxi. He was sorry for the fight, he said, and would see her in the afternoon. He’d be in Kensington Gardens, catching up on some reading on the bench that they’d shared the day before, and he’d have lunch for the two of them.

Elsa didn’t need her sweater as her taxi sped back along Vauxhall Bridge, over the languid river heavy with sediment and with itself. The window down, the breeze filled the taxi, rushing through her hair, into her eyes, along the back of her neck, her shoulders, across her lap. It swirled and went out, replaced in turn by successive rushes of the same whole. The day had warmed, and she felt its warmth on her face and bare arms. She held her hand out the window and felt London with her fingers, her palm and wrist and forearm as she blew through it and it through her. She and Allen would not discuss the fight or her meeting with Max. In a few days, they would be in Paris, and after that, somewhere new and somewhere new again. Cities and towns and villages, hushed moments with her husband as they eased together into old age. She felt light. She felt youthful without the burden of being young. Her hand turned circles out the taxi window. The past has come and gone, she thought. The future, she could feel like a city in her hand, is all that is left.