Fiction

The Maths Tutor

By Tessa Hadley

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In her thirties, Lorraine was unfaithful once or twice; she didn't tell her husband. Quentin owed her, she reckoned, in that long accounting of pluses and minuses which is marriage. Owed her not only because he was unfaithful, too—although he certainly had been, she didn't doubt it, and more than once or twice—but also because he was impossible. He was one of those impossible men, attractive but also sleazy, in a way that was more popular then, in the eighties and nineties, than it is now. He was long-limbed and superskinny, fizzing and jigging and restless with energy, his ugly sharp face alight with cleverness and mockery of everything. Nowadays he wouldn't get away with it. Quent didn't once, not ever, attend any of the parents' evenings at their children's schools, or cook a meal for the family, or use the vacuum cleaner. If he took the children out it was on some crazy, risky adventure, not to buy shoes. Usually, anyway, he was high on some illegal substance or another. When Lorraine thought of him, that was how she pictured him: deep in concentration, his long hair falling forward around his face dipped to the toke, his hand cupped around the lighter flame, his gracile long fingers stained

with nicotine. Sometimes he fried up steaks with herbs and wine when they had friends round to eat, and everyone was amazed by his culinary skills; it was all so delicious. He paid a fortune once, at a time when they were so short of money, for a good suit lined in purple silk, sewn by a tailor who made suits for the Rolling Stones.

Why shouldn't Lorraine have her bit of pleasure? Her affairs buoyed her up, when the reality of her days was mostly the slog of child care, worrying about the children's happiness and rushing around picking up plates and toys and dirty clothes from the floor before she went off to work. Quent was a musician. He knew a lot of people and got to play keyboards with some of the old sixties bands still on the scene and some of the punk bands. But it was Lorraine's steady, modest income, as an administrator in the admissions office at a polytechnic, that kept the wolf from the door. But the wolf wasn't at the door, she thought then, with that sort of grimly satisfied, righteous outrage it was too easy to get addicted to. The wolf was inside the house! She put the wolf's clothes in the washing machine and nursed him when he was sick. The wolf slept beside her in the marital bed.

So she helped herself to her affairs, in a spirit of compensation. She could still get the men to look at her if she wanted to, with her slight figure and home-bleached hair, in a punky cut; she was good at finding striking clothes in the charity shops. Quent would never have chosen her if she hadn't had a certain style; he was even loyal to her in his way. Lorraine had clear skin, a long, straight nose, blue eyes set rather far apart; her expression was surprised and amused, as if she had just been woken up but was ready for anything. Men liked her straightforwardness and freshness, her good sense.

The daughter of a noncommissioned Army officer, she'd grown up in Aden and Malta and Germany. Her mother died when she was thirteen; her older sister married into the military. Lorraine was rootless and all but estranged from her family. Even if her father and sister had wanted to get together with Quent, he'd have refused to have anything to do with them; he said the old man was a Fascist and her sister was too fucked up—he couldn't be bothered with them. Which was convenient for him, whereas Lorraine had to expend a lot of energy looking out for Quent's raddled, boozy, hurtful old mother, who didn't like children and called Lorraine "the Domestic Goddess," which she meant unkindly, although she tucked

readily enough into the meals Lorraine cooked. She'd once said out loud to Quent, in front of Lorraine, that his wife had a doll's face and her tastes were suburban.

Once a year, Lorraine took the children on the coach to see her father, who was retired and living in Scarborough. Quent and his mother were supposedly very left-wing and loved the working classes, but Lorraine's dad was working class and they didn't love him. When she was a girl she'd made herself ill with her passionate opposition to her father's attitudes and his politics, but she didn't bother to argue with him now; it wasn't worth it. She saw how he was bound to think along those lines, given the life he'd had. And all the time, at the back of her awareness, she cherished the secret of the little flame of her love affairs and her greedy sensuous self, as if these were a kind of counterargument to her father's intransigence and his loneliness. Generally, though, she treated the whole business lightly. There was no heartbreak in those affairs; no one promised anything. They were her little flings. The serious business of her life was at home with her children.

Then, in her forties, just as everything became more dangerous—her father died, her body changed and grew heavier, and her feelings were dragged down, too, as if by the same gravitational force—Lorraine was ready to embark on another affair. This time she seemed to be risking everything; so much more was at stake. Her children were in their teens now, and her two daughters were coming into their own beauty, poised and resplendent as spring narcissi; their perfection made her feel ashamed of something flawed and unfinished in herself. Her son, Calum, was preparing for his maths G.C.S.E., and he had the same cold, panicky sweats over figures that she'd once had. She and Quent agreed to hire a tutor from an agency. They couldn't really afford it, but Lorraine was determined not to let Calum fail maths as she had done. The tutor came to their house in the evening and sat at the kitchen table with Lorraine and Calum, explaining how they would prepare for the exam. She'd thought that the tutor would be a young man, just out of university, and was disappointed at first when she saw him on the doorstep, burdened and slightly stooped, brown hair sprinkled with gray; she was afraid that he might be boring. The tutor laughed at the pair of them, sitting there at the table so unhappily, just because of maths.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Trust me."

He was very gentle, looking from one to the other, spreading out his hands, palms up, toward them on the table, as if he were offering them something. He'd printed out lots of past exam papers. "If the cost, C pence, of printing party invitations is given by C=120+40*n*, and *n* is the number of invites . . ."

Calum sighed and ran his fingers melodramatically up his face into his white-blond hair, pushing it up in tufts. "I'd never even have a party," he said. "And if I did I'd just ask people. Word of mouth."

Lorraine remembered when Calum was a baby, so adorably eager and tender. Now he said "arks" instead of "ask," and "mouf," in the school patois, which was meant to annoy her and shut her out, though in fact she took pride in his navigation of the treacherous world of school.

"Let's see what your mother thinks," the tutor said. "Let's see if she can work it out."

At every step of their session he involved Lorraine, and she understood that this was partly a technique to take the pressure off Calum. The tutor—whose name was Greg—calmed Lorraine down, so that she could see the numbers plainly, and then, while Lorraine went slowly through the working-out, Calum often arrived at the answer ahead of her. But it wasn't only a technique, she thought. It was also because Greg's nature was considerate; he was careful to include everyone in the room. Shyly, when their hour was up, she handed him an envelope with the money in it, and asked if he'd like to stay for a coffee; he said that would be nice, he wasn't in a hurry. Calum escaped upstairs to watch telly. He wasn't supposed to have a television in his room, but he'd smuggled in a tiny battered portable, with a twisted coat hanger for an aerial, which he'd got from one of his friends whose parents were throwing it out.

Lorraine and Greg talked about the fear that so many people had of maths and numbers. "It isn't the inability that produces the fear," he said. "It's almost always the other way round—the fear produces the inability. So it's a matter of conjuring away the fear, like blowing away a fog. Then you can see the numbers for what they are."

"Well, it worked with me," she said. "I'm surprised. I really quite enjoyed myself."

“Perhaps you’ll sit in again next week?”

“I’d like to, if you don’t mind. I think it helped Calum.”

She guessed that Greg was in his late thirties, quite a few years younger than her, just young enough to not look dowdy in his faded, rumpled shirt, worn through at the collar—he obviously never gave a thought to his clothes. His head was round and shapely, like a classical drawing of a boy, gray-brown hair cut short above the ears; he was boyish in his straightness and his frankness, speaking very sincerely and looking directly at her. Lorraine got out of him that he was married to a Frenchwoman but they were separated, with one child, a boy of six. Mostly he’d worked as an anthropologist, he said, but he’d always been good at statistics, hence the maths tutoring. He had lived with his wife in Mali and then Senegal, but now he’d come home to make a new life for himself in the U.K. He liked teaching and might train to be a teacher, so that he could have his son to stay during the school holidays; he didn’t mind living alone, although he missed his son. He liked his own company, doing things in his own time. In fact, the solitude was a relief, after the last months of his marriage.

“Marriage, huh?” Lorraine said sympathetically. “There ought to be a health warning.”

But she could tell that Greg was drawn to their family life in that too small, arty, untidy, comfortable home in Kensal Rise: political posters on the wall, earthenware mugs on the kitchen table, piano piled up with music, beautiful girls popping in and out. He probably would have been drawn to Quent, too, if Quent had been around—needless to say, he wasn’t. When Greg had gone, Lorraine sat at the table with a glass of wine, going over some of the maths problems they’d solved together and deriving a pleasure, for the first time in her life, from the numbers whose relationships were set out so exactly and so transparently.

Over the next weeks she fell thoroughly in love, for the first time ever. This was different from the old half-antagonistic games of flirtation and advantage. She’d never even been in love with Quent in this way; she’d only been bowled over by his seduction, which was an entrance into a bigger life. Quent had shown her how to escape the narrowness and unhappiness of her home, and she was grateful for that. He’d set a high watermark for living audaciously and taking what you wanted

for yourself. And now what she wanted was the quiet maths tutor, who sat patiently at her kitchen table, going over vectors and isosceles triangles with her and Calum.

Usually Greg stayed when their session was over, to have a coffee with her, or a glass of wine, and then they talked so easily together. He must surely have felt it, too: how in tune they were. They were both gentle and careful and alert, not unjudgmental. Greg was steady and decent, delicate in his perceptions. She loved his wholeness and his self-possession, his head bent diligently over the maths papers, his lean young jaw, his enthusiasm when Calum grasped some new concept. Love flooded in her like a spill of paint, blooming across her consciousness and through all her sensations, staining everything with its brilliant vermillion. She was sure that Greg liked her. But did he feel anything more? He was relieved to have someone he could talk to. Because he'd been away from England for so long, he'd lost touch with a lot of his old friends; he hinted that his wife had been difficult, and had alienated some of them. His smile was bruised and tentative when he spoke about his wife. He wasn't unkind, but there was something inexorable and final in his assessment of her.

Quent came home once while she and Greg were talking, and sat down to roll up and drink wine with them, entertaining them. He told funny stories about his maths teacher at school, how he used to grope the boys' genitals while they wrote out sums on the blackboard; he was called Chalky because he left chalk handprints on their trousers. "I can see how that might put you off," Greg said.

"Fucking aversion therapy. If I hear 'quadratic equation,' or 'volume of a cone,' or 'income-tax return,' I get a pain in my balls."

Lorraine had heard this story often before. "That's your convenient excuse," she said.

"Blame it on old Chalky."

Quent either ignored new people as if they didn't exist or he set out to charm them. He told Greg how at fifteen he'd got himself chucked out of his horrible boarding school for selling dope, then had never gone back into education, had lived by his wits. And by *my* wits, Lorraine thought. She sensed that Greg was watching Quent

like an anthropologist, studying his type even as he enjoyed Quent's flamboyant energy and jokes. Afterward, she wanted to explain everything that was wrong with Quent, but she knew that Greg wouldn't like that. He'd listen, but he'd be disappointed in her if she descended to merely complaining about her husband. That would be bad form. It was all right for him to drop hints about his wife, because they were separated. And, as for Quent, he'd forgotten Greg by the next day. When Lorraine mentioned that she was going to meet Greg for a drink at lunchtime, to talk about Calum's exams, he looked at her quite blankly. *Who*?

She was helpless with love by then. This lunchtime meeting was a test; surely, as Greg had agreed to come, he must be feeling something. He couldn't be such an innocent as to believe that she really just wanted to discuss Calum's exams, could he? Lorraine seemed to feel attraction flowing between them slowly and sweetly and inexorably; their talk was wholly innocent and friendly, but they couldn't stop smiling whenever their eyes met. She told him about the garrison schools she'd attended in Malta and Germany, and called herself a Forces Brat. Greg hadn't heard the term before; he was interested in it, and in her past, her childhood. And he told her about his research in Mali, on the country's rural communes and its rich corpus of customary law; he explained that he'd left because of the war and the pressure, once field work became impossible, to supply analysis almost as an arm of international intelligence, which wasn't what he'd gone into anthropology for. "The whole discipline's eating itself, anyway," he said. "No one knows who's got the right to study whom. I suspect that my heart isn't in it anymore." He laughed. "Now you're making a face like Calum did when I talked to him about algebra."

"What kind of face? What does it look like?"

"Suspicious? Faintly hostile?"

"But I'm not hostile. It's just that fear again, like with the maths. Because I don't understand your work, so I feel stupid and ignorant."

He reassured her: why should she know about the politics of Mali? She should never be ashamed of not knowing something. "There are plenty of things I'm afraid of, too," he said. When they stood up to leave the pub and Greg helped her on with her coat, putting his arm around her to settle it on her shoulders, she was ready to sink to her knees with desire. She wanted to lean back then and there into

his embrace, and reach up her mouth to be kissed, but didn't quite have the nerve—in case she was just deluded and imagining it all, or in case she was too old for him, or not good-looking enough. He seemed blindingly youthful and beautiful to her that afternoon. The two glasses of wine she'd drunk played a part, no doubt, in this whirlpool of sensations. Lorraine thought, If I don't see him again, after Calum's exam, I'll die. Her life would be stopped up, as if a blood clot had blocked the passage of blood from her heart to her body.

She was cunning in her necessity, scheming to find a way for them to meet. When she handed Greg the usual envelope with his money in it, after the last maths lesson, there was a message tucked inside. Luckily, he never opened the envelope in front of her, always took it home with him unopened. In the message she gave him the address of a flat in Notting Hill, and let him know that she'd be staying there alone, cat-sitting for a friend, on a certain date in a couple of weeks. Quent was taking Calum off to a festival that weekend, and the girls were going to Greece with the family of a schoolmate, but it wouldn't have felt right, inviting Greg into the family home. Lorraine had confided in her friend Carol, a single woman who knew about those other affairs, and had promised to vacate her flat. There really was a cat.

In her note she didn't spell out, of course, that she wanted Greg to come to the flat to make love to her and spend the night with her. She simply wrote that she'd like to see him again, and cook him a meal to thank him properly for everything he'd done for Calum. She was at a loose end that weekend, she said, with all the family away. She'd asked him to come at seven. *No need to confirm, just turn up if you're free. If not, I'll curl up with the cat and put on a video or something.* But surely he would have let her know if, for some practical reason, he couldn't be there?

On her way to the flat Lorraine shopped for food and wine and gin, spending extravagantly; she'd chosen an easy recipe for spiced lamb fillet with spinach and dried cranberries. If she cooked in advance, she could shower and get dressed in plenty of time before Greg arrived. Carol had a good job with a women's magazine; the flat was on the first floor of a Georgian terrace. It was tranquil and elegant, sparsely furnished with antiques and treasures and a few striking pictures; sunshine lay in patches on faded rugs on the bare boards. Lorraine pulled up the windows and put flowers in a vase. She made herself at home in Carol's kitchen,

preparing the food, while the tall old tabby strode about uneasily, rubbing his face against the table legs to leave his scent, only half accepting her intrusion. Then she showered and got ready in the bedroom, in the thick yellow evening light, putting on the clothes she'd chosen so carefully: flattering and sexy but not too blatant or too dressy.

It was half past six. She made herself a gin-and-tonic for courage, put Joni Mitchell on the CD player and took it off again—too feminine—and put on Miles Davis instead. She had absolutely no idea of Greg's taste in music. Yet his presence was so vivid in her anticipation that she moved suavely and sensuously, as if he were already watching her.

This was all before mobile phones, and she hadn't given Greg Carol's landline number. Just giving him the address had seemed more tasteful somehow, like dropping a clue for the hero of a fairy tale to follow. Nonetheless, as time passed she couldn't help fixing her attention on Carol's phone, as if it might ring, after all—and then it did ring, and she leaped for it, but it was only someone calling for Carol. By then it was seven-thirty. She poured herself a glass of wine, and then another, and didn't put on any more music when the Miles CD was finished. And then it was eight o'clock, and then eight-thirty. Her empty stomach hurt from drinking, but she wasn't hungry and couldn't possibly eat by herself the food she'd prepared for the two of them. She couldn't put on the television, either, or read a book: she didn't want to break her concentration; she was holding herself ready for whatever came next. The cat had got used to her and tried to climb into her lap. Outside, the light faded and Lorraine felt in her own body the shock of each footstep on the street, approaching and receding. By half past nine, she knew that Greg wasn't coming. She cut herself a slice of the cheesecake she'd bought in case he wanted pudding. At half past ten, she took off the clothes she'd put on with such high hopes, climbed into Carol's bed, made up with scented sheets, and fell asleep at once.

Her first thought when she woke in the morning was that she must conceal what had not happened from Carol. So she washed two unused dinner plates and two sets of knives and forks and glasses in the kitchen sink, left these ostentatiously on the draining board; she stripped the bed and put the sheets in the washer-dryer, left a card by the flowers thanking Carol, signed with kisses and an exclamation mark,

put the uneaten food in a Tupperware container to take home with her. She was almost jubilant with humiliation, skinned and turned inside out with it. Nothing worse could have happened—except in the real world, of course, where there were so many far worse possibilities. In her own subjectivity, however, she was done for—and this was strangely simplifying. The mental anguish was a problem like a physical wound, a torn ligament or a broken ankle, and she had to arrange herself around it, focussing not on the wound but on the process of getting about in spite of it. It was all very well to say that you would die. But in the meantime you had to go on living. Double-locking Carol's door behind her, Lorraine locked up some might-have-been-significant portion of herself, pushing it deep down inside, where it was lost. On the tube, she thought that everyone could see her shame, written on her face. She seemed to take up residence, then, in some front part of her mind, behind her eyes, where perception was shrewd and hard and shallow.

Calum passed his maths exam. Lorraine got him to sign a card with their thanks, and sent it care of the agency, which must have passed it on because Greg sent back a postcard addressed to Calum, with nothing on the back except his congratulations. And that was that. Because Calum had his maths G.C.S.E., he decided to stay on into the sixth form. He wouldn't admit it, but Lorraine thought that he was proud of himself for passing.

And Lorraine was sitting tight all this time, up at the front of her mind, viewing her life with a new, unforgiving clarity. Quent had come home from the festival as high as a kite, but she'd waited it out, and when he was ready they had a serious talk. She didn't want to carry on the way they were, she said, scrimping and saving and doing without. He was a lazy clever bastard, but she had an idea about how they could use his talents and contacts to make money. He knew so many people in the music business and in music publishing, and he'd been talking recently about the sound guys who were playing around with the new technology. There were going to be changes in the way that recorded music was consumed: young people were starting to listen to MP3s.

"Fucking hell, Lorraine," Quent said. "*Consumed* ? What are you? A capitalist or something?"

“Yes, well, whatever. But isn’t there some way you could get into that? Couldn’t you set up some kind of business, being a liaison between the computer guys and the creatives?”

She could tell that he saw what she meant. But it would never have come to anything without her pushing him, following up on the connections he made, bringing people together to make plans at the little house in Kensal Rise. Lorraine sat in on all their meetings as an equal partner; Quent complained that she was always “on his case.” They got a genius tech guy involved, and an old school friend of Quent’s who was in finance, and they built a platform where users listened for free but the artists could sell copies of their music. Quent brought in some prestige bands, and for a couple of years they did crazily well. When Calum finished his A levels, he came to work for his parents. Even after the tech bubble burst, and the platform was sold to a bigger, blander European company, Quent and Lorraine came out of it with money. Lorraine’s own finances were watertight; she’d made sure that everything was in both their names.

They’d been so busy in those years that they hadn’t had time to organize a move from Kensal Rise, though that had always been the intention. Now Lorraine dedicated herself to finding the right house in the right place. She got a good bargain, an Edwardian end-of-terrace in Stoke Newington that needed a lot of work; it even had outbuildings in the yard, which could be converted into a studio for Quent. During the six months before the work was finished and they were able to move in, Lorraine took great pleasure in spending the money she’d set aside for redoing the house. Nothing rash: it turned out that she had a gift for financial management. There would be plenty left over for them to enjoy a comfortable life style, even if they never started another business—and she and Calum already had a few ideas. In the meantime, though, there was something almost religious in her dedication to choosing things for their new home. She stared into half-finished rooms where the builders were still at work, trying to attain in her imagination to some dream atmosphere that was just out of reach, a subtle shadowed space in which at last she could be sophisticated and complete. And she felt the great good luck of her money almost voluptuously, running fabrics for curtains and upholstery between her fingertips, scouring through dirty reclamation yards for encaustic floor tiles and enamel sinks and brass door fittings, trying the patina of old wood, the thick plush of rugs. She left the art up to Quent, who was better at it.

On the last morning in their old house in Kensal Rise, when everything they wanted to take with them had been packed into boxes ready for the removal men, a letter arrived for Lorraine. She knew immediately what it was, even before she took in the handwriting on the envelope, recognizable from the maths problems Greg used to set Calum for homework. Her first instinct, on picking the letter up from the doormat, was to get rid of it without reading it. Who wrote letters anymore? Its arrival on that very day was an absurdly melodramatic blow from a life she was leaving behind; she crumpled it quickly into her coat pocket. She was going to drive to the new house, to be there when the removal van arrived; Quent was supposed to oversee the loading at this end. Right now he was blocking the narrow hall, annoying Lorraine by going unnecessarily through the black bags full of rubbish that she'd sorted for Calum to take to the tip. Quent was surprisingly sentimental, it turned out, about their shared family past. "You can't get rid of *this*," he'd exclaim in astonishment, holding up a tattered program from some gig he'd once played, or one of the girls' skateboards from when that was a fad, or a football shirt that Calum had loved when he was eleven.

She kept her coat on at first when she got to the new house, which smelled of fresh paint and was chilly until the heating kicked in around the radiators. Walking through the spacious, high-ceilinged rooms she was half preoccupied with the arrangements for the move, half aware of the letter burning in her pocket, paining and tantalizing her. It hardly seemed possible to connect the owner of this gracious place with the woman who'd once believed she was so desperately in love. Obviously, it would be best to throw the letter away unread. On the other hand, if she was going to read it she ought to do so now, before her family rushed in to fill up this emptiness. Afraid and impatient, Lorraine stopped her pacing abruptly, pulled out the letter, and tore open the envelope. Even the paper inside was disappointing: the same childish sheets of blue Basildon Bond her father had once used. Everything about the letter was wrong. It sounded nothing like the Greg she had once counted on. Wasn't she a thousand years older than anyone who could choose to write like this, in blue Biro, with a Boy Scout's solemnity: "I know I've left it a long time to write to you . . . difficult position professionally . . . respected you too much as a friend . . . believed you might come to regret . . ." This stodgy conventional language was repulsive to Lorraine. And the letter, which pretended to be an apology, was in fact only further humiliation. Greg wasn't proposing another meeting, or any renewal of contact; primly, like some maiden lady afraid

of pursuit, he hadn't even put his address at the top of the page. He did let her know that he'd trained as a teacher and had a job at a certain school, so she could have traced him if she were desperate. But she wasn't desperate. On the contrary.

Lifting her head from the letter, Lorraine was pleased with this room which would be their new sitting room, with its rose-colored linen curtains already hanging at the windows and some of her new furniture installed—a charcoal-gray deep sofa and a glass-topped ultra-modern coffee table. She felt safe from the past, in this present so enticing all around her. Shoving the letter back into her pocket, she went upstairs to hang up her coat. It was a lovely heavy coat, in oatmeal tweed. Slipping its weight from her shoulders in the bedroom, feeling the sleeves' lining slick along her arms, she turned to catch sight of herself in the wardrobe mirror, aware of the waft of her perfume. Then catastrophically—but only for one long devastating moment, before she was all right again—she was ambushed by the sensation of something lost, lost forever and never to be restored, because it was too late, and life was time. If only Greg had wanted her, she thought. Then she might have had some other self now, instead of this one—so polished, impervious, capable. She might have been softer and more trusting and open in her middle age, more submissive to possibility—abandoned to possibility, submerged in it. She might have loved a man who was—because now she was remembering Greg as she had wanted him, in spite of the letter—open and generous himself, and imaginative, so that he could really see her, just as she saw him. But all that was soppy nonsense and wishful thinking. Of course it was.

Quentin insisted on carrying things into the new house alongside the removal men, running upstairs with boxes on his shoulder like a twenty-year-old, although Calum refused to be impressed. Setting down a box marked for the master bedroom, he paused to get his breath back, looking out the window and then noticing Lorraine's coat on its hanger. Out of sheer habit—which habit would that be? From boarding school, where you had to be on the lookout for every advantage over the other boys? Or from the late aftermath of parties, where you were feeling for anybody's stash to smoke?—he ran his hands idly into his wife's coat pockets. Partly he just liked the feel of the good tweed and the satin lining. He found the letter from Greg, read it, and took in what it meant—though he had no idea who Greg was—then put it back again.

So that changed everything. He had taken it for granted always, without giving it much thought, that Lorraine was a devoted wife. No, not devoted, because that made her sound stupid and stolid. She was source of his safety, ground of his strength, essential counterbalance to his mother. For the first time in years, his wife clicked into sharper focus for him.

Quent knew at once that he wouldn't say anything to Lorraine about the letter, not ever. In any case, what could he say? It sounded as though nothing had happened. He couldn't quite pick up the story from between the lines, but the guy seemed to have been inadequate to the occasion, whatever it was. Strangely, he hardly cared about the guy; it was Lorraine he was afraid of. He stood in that bare room where there was only a wardrobe and a bed and a few boxes, and understood that he didn't know her. Her physical presence and her demeanor—plump, neat, pliant figure and worn pink complexion, quickly amused irony, clear musical voice with that high catch in it like laughter—were as familiar to him as breathing. But he had no idea what was going on behind her eyes, inside her mind. He might as well be moving in with a stranger, sleeping beside a stranger in her bed.

The girls came in the evening to look over the house, and Calum ordered takeaway. They ate sitting around the old kitchen table, which was temporarily in the new kitchen, while they waited for a new table to be custom-made. Quent was in his studio, sorting out his sound system; they rang his mobile to tell him to come and eat. "I mean, first things first, Mum," one of the girls said dryly. "Never mind finding the kettle or the bedsheets or plumbing in the washing machine."

Lorraine reassured them. "I prefer unpacking without him here under my feet."

When Quent came in he was subdued and grumpy, exaggerating his limp from an old motorbike accident. Apparently he was struggling to set up his speakers, and had lost some crucial connecting leads. Calum offered to help him after supper, but Quent said glumly, imposing his mood all around the table, that he was too tired and they might as well leave it till tomorrow. His glooms and resentments were an old story for all of them. Lorraine was used to it; she was used to making her accommodations with the old wolf. But there was something changed in her husband now, head down over his plate of curry, shovelling it in. Defeated old

wolf. That was something new. She turned her eyes away uneasily—she didn't want to see that. She wasn't ready for that yet. ♦

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