

# How to Conduct an Infatuation

On the Thursday

Almost the end of the holidays. This time next week she'll be back at college, but just for today, the sun is shining. Is shining big-time and she's going to enjoy it.

Do it in style. Bare legs, blouse open, shoes off, no shame... There on the front porch, she stretches the five foot nine of herself, a sherry-glass of tonic wine poised just so. "Buckie", they call it. But it's only a tiny glass.

Her chest has freckles. She's never noticed them before – but then, when did her chest last get this much sunny exposure? The sun goes in. Her cleavage makes no shadow above the frayed edging of her bra cups. Her arms are hairy – like a fella's but fair, with rainbow sparkles when the sun is shining.

She's in love, but the situation is impossible. Like her father, he teaches, but because he's living away from home, her parents have taken him in, sort of, inviting him over, feeding him up. Only as soon as the holidays arrive, he goes home, and as soon as they're over, he's back – but then she's gone, too.

The sun goes in, then comes out again, smiling the stubble on her legs into visibility. Hair on her arms, thick as a man's again, all colours of the rainbow as she squints down at the drooping wrist and its Buckfast wine in a glass all shining.

And a fly stumbles like a drunkard into the glass; and drunker still, grumbles beneath the lid of her hand, slapped down at speed, the rest of her not moving. She holds the glass up and stares at the proboscis of the fly, poking against the moist sides of the dimmed glass.

The sun shines and only her warped face is there in the glass to be studied. A proboscis feels its winey way through her convex reflection, pauses on the left cheek, lets go its hold and the fly rinses its front legs like a demented Lady Macbeth.

She tips the wine after the fly, swamping its feet and making it angrier. She lifts her hand. Her fingernails are elegant as the fly rushes off in panic to the open, sober air.

Her radio announces the hour. Her book is bright paged in the sunshine. Clouds park themselves decidedly. She buttons her stomach out of reach of the breeze. She crosses her legs and puts her feet into warm shoes discarded in the dirt. She fingers the sticky glass, pats her drying hair and finds her fringe now smells of wine. 28% proof shampoo, and every insect in the garden after her...

She leaves her buttock-prints deep in the green rep cushion.

Later on the Thursday

Her parents. They called up from Swanage. No good her feeling bitter: she'd been adamant about having no time for day trips, all this college work to do. She'd been to Swanage once. She'd caught a sprat just by putting her hands down into the water. She'd let it go. They were there now, anyway. She put the phone down and returned to the sun-less back room.

When she's four-tenths of the way through a manicure, the door bangs. She has a sneaky, painfully happy feeling of apprehension. She's been waiting for him all the time, under the weight and the spread of the sunshine. Expectancy has invisibly goose-pimpled her warmed flesh even when she's been trapping drunken insects and scorning sunglasses.

Now she opens the door into the kitchen. Catches sight of him through the back-door window. Opens it, and he walks in.

She's there with him. She's become a fragment of his day already, even if he goes away because her parents are not home. But he stays, readily, with no sense of feeling obliged to.

She's perched on a chair arm, leaning into his nearness and finding things on maps, offering tea, self-consciousness ebbing away like consciousness itself.

They're talking – TALKING! She knows he has a steady girlfriend; he gives his own and takes another's body, and yet he talks and he listens. He settles deep into her company. She nestles happily in his comfort and, with delighted confidence, allows her parents to come home later than usual from a day trip. Admits them reluctantly, buoyant on her illusions.

That much, he has given her. That evening, she can paste unmarred into the scrapbook of her memory. How soon its edges will peel away...well, she can think about that tomorrow.

But this day, this evening, are as yet cleared and brightened by pure, absolute joy. He has shared time, energy, words, ideas with her. She hopes her gift to him has been half as great, half as much appreciated...

On the Saturday

The city swallows. She's inside its belly, moving slowly beneath the ribcage of the iron-girders and glass that are Waterloo Whale Station. Then regurgitated. The city spits her back as far as Clapham Junction, and the baser elements of London swamp her – the people, not the buildings; the turdy pavements are as much London as Big Ben. What is the GPO Tower beside the Victorian pinnacles of Lavender Hill Public Library?

Home again, hunter. Catch anything? Wait, wait, don't ask me. Too soon to say.

Unpack into a ready-made untidiness of a long-deserted bedsit. Fling up sash windows dramatically, jamming one and nearly smashing the other. Breathe in next door's fly-spray, then the sublimated rose perfume. Is it roses? Flowers, anyway. A summer smell.

Hot feet. Hot hands. Kick off shoes. Unpack oneself with zest, hanging up the West Country image at the back of the smelly wardrobe. And there, dangling from a lonely hanger, the jaded London-girl personality, self-adhesive, just peel away the backing. Apply to naked persona, taking care to smooth out air bubbles, which spoil the effect.

Like, forget him. You're stuck here now. Remember those resolutions made when The Girlfriend made her appearance?

Sweating coldly beneath the clammy plastic personality, she advances with a shopping list, bags, purse, pencil. She aims to raise her standard of living and returns with foot refresher spray, tomato purée, mixed herbs, and yeast tablets like those she crumbled into milk for the cat when its coat lost its customary lustre.

She estimates she'll drink less milk – i.e. calories – if she switches to tea-drinking. Oh, how elderly she sounds! Who her age is tempted by Broken Orange Pekoe tea, or Lapsang Suchong or whatever? Who her age knows how to say it?

Tomorrow. Tomorrow it'll disappear, this wonderful feeling that he might like her. Or maybe not. She has found a talisman-word, 'Bravado', and she grins it widely, loudly, as cars draw up for her at zebra crossings, as workmen titter. 'Bravado' gets her by.

And that evening, she walks down Lavender Hill, along Northcote Road and up Battersea Rise. And on the contrary, she walks him into her life, because she takes him along with her, as a companion, as a listener, as a destination, as a returning-point. And at every catch of breath, he answers; she makes him speak to her. It's like putting her hand in his pocket, with his hand. Like matching steps, step for step for step...

He's beside her. Turning now, she can see the way the streetlight drapes his cheeks in his lashes' shadows. Hope on old memories superimposed. New name on an old idea. But he's walking alongside her mind, matching her thoughts thought for thought for thought...

And switching on the light in her bedsit, she drops his hand and withdraws her own hand from his pocket. She goes into the light of the room and puts away her mac, adjusts the clock according to the radio pips, sits down and can't complete the Evening Standard bumper crossword because she has to push the paper away and write down the ideas she has about him, because it's the only way she knows how to keep hold of him, the only way of drawing the utmost from the slightest, growing slighter, vestiges of his presence.

Ten days later. On the Tuesday

Oh, the classic situation. The classroom, empty of children. Romance across the desktops. Perhaps he's as aware of the cliché as she is, for his mood is wary, his talk oblique. Remarks are made, intercepted rather than received. He isn't prepared to make things easy for her.

She feels old, standing in pale jeans and dark blouse, too smart, too much like a grownup, knee-high in childish furniture. Flipping fruitlessly through flimsy reading books, chewing the cud of theorists, letting him tell her the way it really is, teaching a kid how to understand the messages people codify and pass on. He seems detached. Maybe he's tired, hungry, worried: he seems all those things, but there could be other reasons.

He doesn't avoid her, but the chances to be close are avoided. He seems to be moving on a different stage, or simply to have stepped down into the auditorium.

They give each other the conventional stories: of why he became a teacher, and why she didn't. And they've talked that out so many times before, she bestowing more rationality on her life every time, while in her mind, it's lost its order. She fills herself with doubt at every assertion. She pains him: she knows she pains him.

But out into the sunshine without him she goes. It's over. Maybe he hadn't slept, had missed a meal, was filled with dread. But there was something more. Fallen, she. Rumbled.

But out into the summer afternoon, smiling, squinting, waiting for her father to open the car door, trying to forget her disappointment.

Grin. Traffic lights. Father makes joke. Grin. Drive round. Grin. Home. Grinnnn. Talk about how useful/grateful/helpful things were/you are/he was. Grin. Smile.

Set the table. Set the shiny mouth he'll never kiss. Oh shut up. Sawing bread. Slap on the plate, buttered slice.

Forget. Forget. Niggle niggle.

He could have invited himself against her several times, but he pointed across the room, instead of leading her. Nodded towards a book lain on the desk open, instead of bringing it to her. He didn't shadow her shoulders with his nearness.

Ache. Butter the loaf. Saw. Reply with a smile. Ask bright questions and switch off for the replies they offer.

The agony of wanting to have been close to him, to have – yes, okay, confession – played-up to the scenery, that TV classroom cliché. One's wildest dreams.

Today, there was no more than there was. A three-dimensional afternoon, like any other. That fourth view, that if-only view, has slipped away. There was nothing more to it. Just him and her. He and she. In his classroom. Knee-high in ancient furniture.

## **Nikki J Copleston**

1<sup>nd</sup> in the Short Story category, 2019 Wells Festival of Literature International Competitions

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