

# *Tout Moun*

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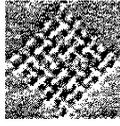
*I Dream to Change the World  
Literature and Social Transformation*

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# *Waterloo*



*BARBARA JENKINS*

The boat train from Southampton charged into Waterloo station. The sudden rush of air swirled little tornadoes of discarded cigarette packets and crumpled ice cream wrappers around her feet. Her mac, a red sail, billowed behind as she leaned into Simon, squeezing out a last hug. She turned away and walked towards the train.

Over the carriages a heavy coil of smoke hung low and, unfurling, darkened the early September fog. On the crowded platform clusters of excited people erupted with shouts and waving, detached themselves, and rushed forward to embrace an arrival. She tiptoed for a glimpse of him, yet each new person that wasn't him felt like a little reprieve. Then, just as she thought the train had emptied, she spotted him descending from a far carriage.

A canvas bag hanging from a shoulder strap weighed him down at the front; a large cardboard suitcase pulled down at each arm. He looked so diminished, so vulnerable. She felt a surge of pity for him. How degrading it must have been for him to gain entry into the Mother Country with an employment voucher for menial work. She felt too a wave of revulsion at herself, for the further disillusionment she must soon inflict on him.

"Hello, Adam."

They stood there, not quite looking at each other, saying and doing nothing, two unrehearsed actors without a script. He rested his cases on the platform the better to take in the sight of her, her wild hair, her Army & Navy Stores cable knit jumper and jeans, her clunky Dr Scholls exercise sandals, and finally her bare, scrubbed face.

"You're different."

She leaned over the canvas bag he held against his chest like a shield and brushed her lips against his cheek. He nodded in a matter of fact way and made to pick up his cases to follow her lead, but she signalled Simon to come over.

"Adam, this is Simon. Simon, Adam."

There was an awkward moment of fumbling with suitcases and handshakes. Simon took the cases. Adam clutched his canvas bag. They made their silent way to the taxi rank.

In the cab she tried to make small talk. How was the sea journey, did he manage to get the train ticket without too much trouble. It sounded stilted and forced even to her ears. People back home didn't greet, didn't speak, like that. She felt herself occupying a kind of limbo space – neither here, where she was still out-of-place, nor there, where she'd somehow misplaced. Adam gave no sign that he noticed or heard. He leaned back in the seat, closing his eyes. She edged towards the window. The world outside seemed so self-assured. That man striding along the pavement knew where he was going, what and whom he would find there. And the woman with the blue headscarf securing the brake of the pram outside the Co-Op had no doubt that her pram, baby, shopping in the tray below, would all be there when she emerged. She herself wasn't sure about anything. What lay in store for her, for them, in the next hour, the next day? She felt trapped – in the cab, and in this situation that she had herself engineered.

She hadn't thought through how she would bridge the yearlong gap of their separation. She didn't know how she would present and explain herself. How would it affect her and Simon? They had been tested before, by his friends' incredulity (you've got a wog bint?), by his parents' dismay (think about the children you'd have; life would be hard for them). But here they were, still together. In those battles they were on the same side. Were they now? She glanced over at him and gave him an encouraging smile. He responded with a wink and reached to hold her hand. She pulled away, pointing with her chin towards Adam who sat slumped, his eyes closed. Simon lifted a surprised eyebrow and turned his attention to the view out the window. She felt a chill pass through her as if someone had walked over her grave.

At the Ladbroke Grove terrace house she followed Adam's eyes running over the basement bedsit – the sofa-bed's balding moss green corduroy, its sagging middle, pillows piled on one arm, folded blankets and sheets on the other, another chair, upright and brown, the grimy little window that permitted meagre light, the distressed yellow oilcloth-covered table with a gas ring, saucepan, frying pan, teapot and cosy, two mugs, two plates, assorted cutlery, the kitchen washbasin sink, the hungry meter grudgingly dispensing gas for cooking and heating. She saw his look of distaste and she wondered how he'd imagined she lived. Hadn't he seen the 'No coloured' signs stuck in windows even in this run-down district? She and Simon suffered a dozen refusals before this. They moved in with their two duffle bags, not caring about squalor or enforced frugality. They'd found their haven.

Simon went out to buy supper. She took Adam to the building's sole bath and toilet, stood guard against his being observed, then escorted him back to the room. She took off her mac and helped him out of his jacket. He sat stiffly at the edge of the sofa as if afraid to commit his body to its seediness. She ran water into the saucepan, lit the fire and ring and asked whether he would like a drink. She could offer only loose leaf PG Tips, she said. He declined, but he watched closely as she warmed the teapot, measured out the brittle black leaves, filled the pot with bubbling water, fit the cosy snug over, poured milk into a mug, dropping in two sugar cubes. Her smooth

competence at what was to him an unfamiliar little domestic ritual may have put him a little at ease. He said he would have some too. They sat in silence sipping the hot brew.

They ate. She and Simon shared one plate and mug, she sitting on the chair, he standing behind her. Adam, on the sofa, picked at the batter-encased cod, the vinegar-splashed chips, the orange baked beans. Then it was time for them to go to work. She saw Simon to the basement door.

“Tell Hugh something’s come up. Say I’ll be in tomorrow.”

Adam was still seated on the sofa, waiting for her when she got back.

“Who is that person?”

His voice was stern – like a headmaster or a father. She sat on the chair. She didn’t answer.

“At first I thought he was a college friend. Someone who came to help with my luggage.”

She would not look at him. She looked down at the threadbare, discoloured carpet. He continued.

“Now I’m not so sure.”

She got up and went over to fill the saucepan with water. She needed to do something.

“Who lives here? Is it you? Or him?” He paused, looking around the room, perhaps for a clue. “Or is it both of you?”

There was a note of triumph in his voice at that last question, as if he had found her out. Found her out in a transgression. She brought over a tray of tea things and placed it on the floor between them. His questions and her answering silence hung heavy around them, reverberating in the close air.

“Why did you bring me over?”

She would answer that. She poured the scalding tea and passed him a mug.

“I wanted you to have a chance to do better for yourself.”

In her letters she never told him she’d met someone else. She feared that if he knew, he might not come. When they were parting, she’d promised she would send for him. She would keep that promise. The other unspoken promise was too fragile to survive the journey and the changes wrought in her by her life in this new place. But she didn’t have the thinking words or the letter-writing words to contain those feelings tidily.

“And working in a greengrocer’s shop in London is better than what I was doing at home?”

“Is there any artist at home who makes a living from art?”

His silence was answer enough. Even Carnival bandleaders and designers, like himself, lived hand to mouth, like paupers.

“I was comfortable there. We were happy there. What have I got now?” His tone turned peevish.

“You have a job. You can go to night school. You can become whoever you want to be. You will make friends.”

“I did not come here to get a job, a career or friends. I came to continue our life together.”

When she first arrived she longed for their old life back home. It was her certainty. He, the promising artist, she, the one committed to support his creative life through her mundane bank clerk job – childhood sweethearts grown into life partners was her fate if she hadn’t left first. Here in a new reality, away from his aura, far from her people and her place, she’d struggled alone to unlearn her old self and learn her new one. She’d been moulded into a different person, one who had a different life. Adam would have to learn himself too. She’d done her duty, given him a head start. In two weeks, she and Simon would be back at their wind-swept seaside university.

She placed the empty mugs on the tray and walked back to the sink. She tipped the used tea leaves into the bin.

“Things have changed.”

“Things have changed or you have changed?”

He picked up his canvas bag and unfastened it. He took out a portfolio. He lifted out a handful of sheets of paper.

“And what shall I do with these now?”

He was holding some of his drawings of her he’d roughly sketched over the years, now completed in fine detail: her face in its many guises of cosmetically enhanced beauty, her body posed for his pen and brush, an arm extended, bangles and rings catching the light, the smooth arch of a foot dangling a stiletto winkle-picker, a single taut breast, scarlet Cupid’s-bow lips, a bare gleaming shoulder blade, her tangled pubic mound where a sleek anthurium nestled. He placed the stack on his lap. Lifting the first drawing, he held it up. Then he began to tear the paper slowly, cutting her image at the midriff. The second, her face, he tore through an eye, across a nose, forehead

and hair one way, chin and mouth another. She knew he wanted to hurt her by this. She also knew he was hurting himself. She could not contain her tears. He looked at her.

“What is making you unhappy? Me, ripping up drawings of you? What about you ripping up my life?”

He held up a charcoal nude. She on his bed, her feet in the foreground, her legs spread, her head propped on pillows. He held it upside down, her feet at the top.

“Is this worse?”

He began to tear the paper apart so that none of her was touched until the slash reached her pubis where he stopped.

“This?”

He continued to rip with slow deliberate care. She felt with the tearing of the paper, the ripping open of her vagina, the slicing through her womb, the separation of her ovaries in her own body. He tore through her belly, her navel, parting her breasts and, with one, swift, final tug, he severed her head. She darted across, snatched the bundle from his lap. He lunged at her. They fell, struggling, on to the carpet.

She let him lay her bare. She let him take and possess. His musk, evocative of a past life, steamy and erratic, yoked her to him. She owed him for the lifetime promises she wouldn't keep, for the silence, the deceit she'd engaged in. She would purge the guilt of her betrayal. She would be redeemed. She would be free. With this and this and this she was building a bridge for him, from the old to the new. She was guiding him safely across. When it was over, they lay side by side, the space between them as wide as the Atlantic, the silence as deep.

After her bath, she came into the room cocooned in a cloud of fragrances that infused the air with faux floral and minty scents, dispelling its earlier, earthy pungency. She saw that he'd fallen asleep, right there on the floor. She spread a blanket over him, tucking it tight around. She lifted his head to slide a pillow under it. Strewn around him, like the petals of a ravaged lily, lay the torn and crumpled images of her as she was then.

She pulled on a pair of black trousers, a crisp white shirt and black pumps. She smoothed her hair into a bun at the nape of her neck. She picked up her red mac and her handbag. She looked around one last time. Then she left, closing the door behind her. She'll be late for work, of course, but Hugh will be glad to have her there in the frantic hours before closing.