

Sara Berkeley

The Sky's Gone Out

BEFORE HE opened his paper, he glanced down the row of faces opposite. He was not looking for anything. His mind was on an incident at the office that is lost to him now if he tries to recall. It amused him how the English scrutinized each other in the Underground, planted in their rows like beans. He liked to catch two people watching one another without their eyes ever meeting. Yet when he was caught looking someone full in the face, he quickly averted his eyes. If it was a woman, even a plain woman, he was aware he often blushed. Frequently when the carriage was empty he played the game with himself in the window opposite. On good days he risked a wink or a wry smile. In general, he was troubled by his weight and thinning hair, and looked quickly away.

He liked to see a pretty face on the tube. He liked to know without looking that a slender leg was three feet from his own; the hollow of an ankle could arouse in him a peculiar melancholy that was pleasant. Sooner or later he always became engrossed in his paper. Sometimes he thought of his wife for a little: not in clear pictures, but in words and abstractions. She was a gentle woman.

He had a theory: on days when a lovely woman sat across from him, there would invariably be three or four more in the carriage. On these days he did not notice the twelve stations go by. Even the men seemed exemplary specimens. He would smile to himself, thinking what a flaw in the design he was. The lower buttons on his shirt gaped, his trouser legs rode up. He didn't mind. If, on the other

of practice the paper refused to fold. It rucked in the middle, the inside pages slipped sideways; it was a mess, and the train had stopped. Still, she did not move and he felt absurdly like laughing. One more, then, one more indulgence. At last he got the paper straight. She was staring down now, directly at his feet. He felt his toes stiffen. Briefly he tried to picture his shoes: which ones was he wearing? What colour socks? Her hands were moving in her lap now, a vague fumbling movement – but her eyes ... did she never blink? Abruptly she lifted her head, but in the moment before he turned his away, he saw that she was looking distractedly to one side, listening to an announcement from the platform. The train would take one of two branches at the next station. Sometimes they changed their minds, you had to listen. The doors closed and he hadn't heard. Let it be! If she alighted at the next station, well, he could too! It didn't matter which line he took. They joined up later and he rode on for several stops.

On the second page of the paper his eye was caught by pictures of the war; tanks, explosions, soldiers, the waste sickened him. His eyes felt irritated and smarted as though stung by the desert sand. The whole world gone mad, and for what? Life went on. Take the woman: it was plain to him she was caught up in some close drama of her own – what might it be? By the cut of her clothes she was a well-bred woman. He winced as two lines of thought crossed in his head: here he was, calmly wondering what sort of calamity might have befallen her that she could look so stricken; at the same time, his thoughts were a hotbed of fantasies. He pictured her crossing a bridge in the wind, her dark coat billowing, her hair blowing across her face. For a moment, as his mind focused sharply on this scene, it seemed unbearable that this woman should be someone he had casually sat opposite not ten minutes ago on a train. How had he worked himself to such a fever pitch in that time? How had the few glimpses of her face worked so powerfully, and stirred such agitation, such peculiar excitement as he was now feeling?

In a moment he had decided: if she left the train at the

next station he would follow. He would casually cross to the other branch, as though it was something he naturally had to do. If she crossed too, perhaps they could continue their journey together in harmless, one-sided companionship, in a sort of secret union; it was, after all, harmless and so ... harmless ... her calves were crossed and elegant in dark stockings, the skirt long, the knees shapely through the light fabric; the train was slowing, he frowned and clutched his paper. Should she move, he must be ready to follow quickly; so easy for a figure to be swallowed in the crowd, the teeming carnival of the underground ...

She was not getting off. She was looking above him, her mouth a little open, and he imagined in the brief glimpse he allowed himself that her breath was coming in short gasps. Perhaps she was ill! Again he felt his scalp prickle as he stared intently at the newsprint. He hated illness in public places. But she did not look ill. He was sure she wasn't ill. It was something else. A matter of love, surely, a matter of the heart. In spite of himself, he felt like smiling; a middle-aged gent on his way home from the office, making up stories about a pretty face. Strangers on a train. The doors closed. He really had intended to get off the train if she had! What would he do, follow her? She would have left the station, and then where would he be? Stranded, on the platform, the picture of foolishness. It was not like him to risk looking foolish. In this way, he tried to swallow it down, the rise of his feelings, the lightness that took hold. The next stop was Waterloo: he thought of that picture of the bridge in purple smoke and dusk. She would get off at Waterloo. She would cross the bridge in the evening with the sky and the water turning just those lurid colours: a dark, threatening cumulus of blues and purples.

Far underground, where seven tunnels met in a wide passage, seven streams of people merged and massed at the foot of the escalator. She took the right hand side. She was a swift

and accurate mover in a crowd. He trod on toes and elbowed people out the way, distantly amazed at his own rudeness. He almost lost her on the steps behind a group of boys. He almost lost her again passing through the ticket barrier. Caught behind an old man, his impatience turned to panic. There was only one reason he was emerging from Waterloo station at five on a Tuesday and it was itself so elusive he had difficulty keeping it in his grasp. She was slipping away from him. Gritting his teeth, he pushed through the crowd, muttering excuses, his eyes fixed on the black hat thirty yards away. 'All right, all right,' the ticket collector said, and an old lady nearby clucked reprovingly.

The black hat was still visible beyond the people walking the long corridor at the back of the concourse. Red railings. White tiles. It was a long time since he had been in Waterloo station. A beautiful building, with its latticework and gables. He remembered it well and knew if he glanced to his right, past the telephones, he would glimpse the lofty iron trellis-work of the roof. She was now turning towards the York Road exit.

His shoes sounded smartly on the tiles and for the length of the corridor he allowed himself to feel as full of purpose as he sounded. In fact, he was in a strange state. His rational side was sitting back, far back in the shadow of this thing, whatever it was, that was driving him forward in her pursuit. Having left the train he knew there was no turning round. The balance tipped, his excitement tampered with the valves of his heart, he was passing through fire. He could just see the tails of her coat billow as she turned the corner. He racked his brains to recall the geography of the place: another flight of stairs and then a confusion of turnings and exits – the red iron gates folded back from the main exit ahead. He would surely lose her there. The humiliation of turning back now! He broke into a heavy run.

It had begun to rain, an unsteady drizzle, and commuters were pouring into the station. By the taxi rank, he stood a moment, out of breath already, searching for her. She had

broken free from the crowd and was heading for Waterloo Bridge. Years before, he had worked for a while with the homeless on the Embankment. He and a group of others had brought them food, sat around the fires, when they were welcome, listened to the stories. Memories of that time flooded him as he descended to the riddle of subways and emerged on the great bowl, wet now and bleak as ever. She was entering the far tunnel, the one that led up to the bridge itself. To follow her, he would have to pass them, the shambling figures round their fires, huddled in their blankets. Suddenly, he felt his face begin to burn with shame. Once he had come here with time and food to offer the hopeless. Now he hurried blindly across the concrete, his thoughts in uproar. Follow her! Follow her you fool! Soon she will be gone. Soon you will walk by the river, by the *Queen Mary* and *Cleopatra's Needle*, to Embankment station to catch the next train; for that is what you are going to do, you sad old man. No more of this. You are a plain man. No more of this madness then. It does not belong in the vessel of your life. It was not meant.

Ahead, he saw them, overcoated men, hanging around by the bottom of the ramp. They watched her pass by, hands in their pockets, and he imagined their eyes, dull and hooded. They let her go by, no one made a move. His face was still burning, though he knew they could not see, and his hands hung stiffly by his side. No time, he muttered to himself as he approached. One of the men moved his hand, scarcely bothering to make a supplicatory gesture. He shook his head quickly. No time now to fumble in pockets for a coin and shrug off the response in a welter of discomfort and shame. She was on the bridge. Let me go now, he pleaded silently to the hunched figures, let me go.

The crowd moved from North to South. She walked by the rails and people stepped aside to make way for her. It was difficult to see distinctly, but he thought that people turned

as she passed and he understood this. Like him, they could not help taking a second look. He imagined the whole flow of city workers coming to a halt, piling into one another, trying to turn back and follow her. It seemed as though only he was going in the right direction. I am walking to Embankment station, he told himself, but he knew it was not so. He was following this woman. Something in a stranger's face had made it impossible to remain on the train he travelled on every evening to his home in Woodside Park. He had done something unaccountable; now he felt as though the gesture had launched him into an uninteruptable state. With the wind hitting him hard downriver and the rain blowing on his face, he knew now he could make no mistake. He was carried forward, against the crowd, his eyes continually seeking and finding the woman ahead. He was filled with a sense of irony, but it had no object.

It was simple on the bridge. He even gained on her, making up for the gap that had widened in the station. She was now ten yards ahead, no more. He could see her ankles, the dark heels of her shoes on the wet pavement. Her hat sat crookedly and the wind blew her hair exactly as he had imagined. He laughed aloud, and the sound was carried away on the wind. Now he had a chance to look around him – the vast panorama of the Thames, Westminster to Blackfriars, the proud riverbanks. It was years since he had walked here. He felt tiny. They were all specks, hurrying across this great structure, pendulously draped across the expanse of rolling water. Even the river was tiny, a blue streak on a map, dividing the grey stain that was London. Only she was something, this woman. By her very rejection of everything around her, she became something herself. He was nothing, he knew that, and he did not mind. She was something and he had understood. Now he was allowed to follow her; for a brief span of both their lives he would bind them together. It was irrelevant that only one of them knew. One was enough. And besides, he thought, I'm glad it is me. After all, what if she were following *me* across Waterloo Bridge towards the

rich promise of the city beyond? I would never have seen those eyes. I would be less than I am.

It remained with him, this inexplicable feeling of well-being, all the way across the bridge. Rain was damping his hair down. There were dark streaks on his coat, his briefcase was bubbled with tiny drops. He was able to keep up without effort. As they neared the city side, his thoughts began to roam around the hub of streets leading to Covent Garden and the West End. Still, he did not allow himself to speculate where she was going. His thoughts were dreamlike, everything unpleasant was submerged.

It came as a shock when she made a rapid turn and began to descend to Victoria Embankment. A quick decision was needed: on the bridge, where there were hundreds of people, it was easy to follow her without being noticed. On the Embankment there were few people; he would be conspicuous keeping ten, even twenty yards behind a lone woman. He stopped by the parapet where it curved out to the steps down. She had already disappeared but she would emerge below; he could see then where she went. Once again, he told himself that he was going to walk to Embankment station. His eyes on the dirty blue and white of the *Queen Mary*, he waited until she would have emerged below. Yes, she was there, heading upriver towards Cleopatra's Needle. The stairs were wet and the passage smelt dank. He could hear the cars passing outside, but for a few seconds he was alone on the staircase, clattering down, his hand out in case he slipped – and she was out of sight. Now, he thought, imagine she is gone. When you emerge, she is nowhere to be seen, the bond is severed and you carry on ... as though ... nothing ... In the moment he reached the street, his eyes sought her avidly. She was still there, crossing at the lights, walking straight in the rain. He followed, grateful, absurdly relieved; happy again.

The gap was wider than ever. He could scarcely make

out the details her hair made against hat and collar. Her hands were pale marks against her coat. The lights had changed again and he could have done a dance of impatience as he waited for a break in the traffic to dash across. But there she was, familiar now, he held her warmly with his eyes. He wished to speak to her, silently in his head, but he could find no words. I am here, he wanted to say. Whatever it is, do not despair. But they sounded like the words of a foolish middle-aged man in a mac, and he was no such man. He was nothing.

She was approaching Cleopatra's Needle now, they were rounding the river together, and for the first time her steps faltered. So used to the pace now, he faltered momentarily too. What to do? It was raining: he couldn't sit on a bench, he couldn't stop, it was out of the question. Such an interruption now would lift the lid on a scene of great emptiness. She was walking quite slowly now, with none of the purpose that had carried them across the bridge. Her hands hung limply by her sides. Rain drove in gusts against their faces. He was blinded and he felt at risk. Great peril, somewhere, just behind him, breathing on his neck. Instinctively, he raised a hand to the back of his neck as though to swat a fly and at the same moment she stopped. She had reached the sphinx, the first of the two that flanked Cleopatra's Needle. She put a hand out as though to touch the stone, but it touched nothing. As he watched in disbelief, walking as slowly as he dared now, she turned and descended the few steps to the parapet overlooking the river. Standing there, she put her hands flat on the broad wall. The wind chose that moment for a vicious squall that lifted her hat and carried it in a trice up, somersaulting once, and then swiftly out over the river and down until it was lost from view. She did not seem to notice. He could see one side of her face, close enough now to make out that her eyes were open and staring across the river, wild as they had seemed on the train, staring at his own feet.

There was no alternative. He must pass her by, leave her

behind. It never entered his head to do otherwise. But his eyes were fixed on her. If he had to tear himself away, he would see her until the last possible moment. She looked tragic now, standing like that, with her hands spread out, flat on the stone, and her hair blowing unchecked across her face. As he reached the sphinx, once again as close to her as he had ever been since leaving the train, able to make out the curve of cheek and neck, she tipped back her head and shouted. The words were blown to him, fouled by the same wind that carried them. He made out sounds, sounds only, they made no sense. For a blind moment, it occurred to him to stop, approach her, touch her shoulder. As soon as it was conceived, the idea of intruding on her distress revolted him. Turning his collar up, he began to walk quickly, past Cleopatra's Needle, past the second sphinx, up the bank of the Thames River towards Embankment station.

Before the bridge he crossed and entered the station in a crowd of others. Through the ticket barrier and down, mechanically following the black arrows. All at once, he was on another train platform, waiting in the close air for another train. On the surface, his thoughts were childishly simple. He observed several things: on the opposite platform, a man shook out his umbrella with a grimace. A child skipped close to the platform edge. He felt the need to urinate. Deep in his brain, the sounds he had heard were being swapped and juggled, echoing in patterns that veered close to sense, then back to unintelligible sounds. But before the train reached the station, while it was still rumbling through the dark, something clicked and he could clearly understand what she had said. The headlights were visible now and a grubby wind blew. They were suddenly obvious, the words, and he felt momentarily exalted. Turning a little, catching the last moment of quiet before the air filled, he began to say them over and over, softly, to no one in particular.

hand, an ugly woman sat opposite, her companions were likely to be drab. Everyone's hair looked greasy. Dandruff prevailed.

The train was full but not crowded, and he got a seat at once: his favourite, at the end. With pleasure he folded his paper and patted it down in his lap. In his first, cursory glance he saw her, but the tiny sound he made involuntarily in his throat was swallowed easily by the train's hum. Suddenly, he had no desire to scan the rest of the faces opposite, nor to make out the reflections of his neighbours in the windows. He looked quickly at his paper. He had read the first paragraph twice. He felt a strong desire to look at her again. She might be getting off at the next station; like hundreds before her, she would disappear in the crowd. Beauty was made to be gratefully admired. He raised his eyes. She was staring an inch to the left of him. She looked transfixed, the word came to him, clear as a bell. Hurriedly he looked away, annoyed with himself, but at the same time acutely troubled. He felt a sensation at the back of his neck and knew it must be the beginning of a blush. Her look! He stared at a point on the door, struggling to think why her look troubled him so greatly. Certainly she was striking. She had the bone structure of a very lovely woman, her hair was silky and escaped from her black felt hat in the kind of tangled curls he particularly liked. Who did she resemble? No one. He realized he had never seen another woman like her. But it was not her face that kept him in this suddenly heightened state - it was her expression. She had stared a little to one side of him with a look of wildness, there was no other way to describe it.

Stiffly, he returned to his paper and read the same paragraph. His eyes fixed on the last word, unseeingly, as he realized that the train was slowing at a station. Once again, she might get off. She might leave. In ten seconds he could be staring at an empty seat, unable to believe she was no longer there. He had to look at the face one more time. His sense of foolishness was uncomfortable, but as the train

stopped and she did not move, he let relief embolden him and glanced across. Her eyes were closed.

He did not hear the babble of alighting and movement in the train around him. For a moment he held his breath. He felt a brief, unidentifiable ache in his abdomen. She sat very still, almost stiffly, with her hands loose on her lap. Her clothes were dark - he took them in confusedly, tensely aware that at any second she might open her eyes and look at him. An infinitesimal scene tripped through his head: she saw him, she was angry, she shouted something, reached across and slapped his face. He felt a hot blush spreading from the roots of his hair, he could feel the tingling on his cheek that followed the sharp impact of her hand.

On her lap, the fingers of one hand clenched suddenly into a fist, then relaxed. She wore no rings. Her eyes were still closed: he allowed himself three agonizingly long seconds taking in the lashes, the cheekbones, the perfect skin, then looked dazedly back down at the paper in his lap. He brought one hand out from under it and studied his nails with care. Details like the white of his cuticles brought him slowly back to rational thought. My god she's lovely. He thought the words once, loudly, then felt a delicious, tantalizing power. If he read his paper for a little longer, before they reached the next station, he could turn the page and take the natural opportunity to glance idly round the carriage. It bothered him that someone might have seen him staring at her, seen the incriminating blush. He wanted to look around defensively, aggressively even, to subdue any knowing looks he might receive. But I am ridiculous, he thought, and again the words came loud and clear. Ridiculous. An old ass. He thought with a smile of his son's latest phrase: a spa. You're a spa daddy. He had rebuked him for using it just the other day.

The train slowed and all thoughts were wiped from his mind. He turned the page of his paper with difficulty. Despite years