**The Elephant - A Short Story**

**Details**

Written by Lynne Hand

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Once upon a time, in a village far away, there lived six blind men.

One day the villagers were very excited, and when they asked what was happening they told them, "Hey, there is an elephant in the village today!"

 They had no idea what an elephant was, and so they decided, "Even though we will not be able to see it, we can feel it.  Let's go."  So, they all went to where the elephant was, and each of them touched it:

"Hey, the elephant is a pillar," said the first man, touching its leg.

"Oh, no! it is like a rope," said the second man, who was touching the tail.

"Oh, no! it is like the branch of a tree," said the third man, touching the tusk of the elephant.

"It is like a big hand fan" said the fourth man, who was touching its ear.

"It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man, touching the side of the elephant.

"It is like a pipe," said the sixth man, touching the trunk of the elephant.

They began to argue about what the elephant was like, and each of them insisted that he was right.

They were getting angry, and fists were about to fly, when  a wise man, who had come to see the elephant asked what the matter was.

They replied, "We cannot agree what this elephant looks like," and each of them told the wise man what he thought the elephant was like.

The wise man smiled and calmly explained to them, "You are all correct. The reason that each of you experienced it differently is because you touched a different part of the elephant. Actually the elephant has all these features: Its legs are like pillars, its tail is like a rope, its tusks are like the branches of a tree, its ears are like a fan, and it has a trunk, that is just is like a pipe.

"Oh!" the blind men said, and there was no more fighting. They felt happy that they had all been right.

The moral of this story is that even if you don't agree with someone, there may be some truth to what they say. Sometimes we can see that truth and sometimes we can't, because they have a different perspective to us, but rather than arguing like the blind men, we should realise that they have their own experiences that make them think this way. If we can accept this, we are much less likely to get into violent arguments.

**In The Spring - A Short Story**

**Details**

Written by Guy de Maupassant

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For Zom

With the first day of spring, when the awakening earth puts on its garment of green, and the warm, fragrant air fans our faces and fills our lungs and appears even to penetrate to our hearts, we experience a vague, undefined longing for freedom, for happiness, a desire to run, to wander aimlessly, to breathe in the spring. The previous winter having been unusually severe, this spring feeling was like a form of intoxication in May, as if there were an overabundant supply of sap.

One morning on waking I saw from my window the blue sky glowing in the sun above the neighbouring houses. The canaries hanging in the windows were singing loudly, and so were the servants on every floor; a cheerful noise rose up from the streets, and I went out, my spirits as bright as the day, to go—I did not exactly know where. Everybody I met seemed to be smiling; an air of happiness appeared to pervade everything in the warm light of returning spring. One might almost have said that a breeze of love was blowing through the city, and the sight of the young women whom I saw in the streets in their morning toilets, in the depths of whose eyes there lurked a hidden tenderness, and who walked with languid grace, filled my heart with agitation.

Without knowing how or why, I found myself on the banks of the Seine. Steamboats were starting for Suresnes, and suddenly I was seized by an unconquerable desire to take a walk through the woods. The deck of the Mouche was covered with passengers, for the sun in early spring draws one out of the house, in spite of themselves, and everybody moves about, goes and comes and talks to his neighbour.

I had a girl neighbour; a little work-girl, no doubt, who possessed the true Parisian charm: a little head, with light curly hair, which looked like a shimmer of light as it danced in the wind, came down to her ears, and descended to the nape of her neck, where it became such fine, light-coloured clown that one could scarcely see it, but felt an irresistible desire to shower kisses on it.

Under my persistent gaze, she turned her head toward me, and then immediately looked down, while a slight crease at the side of her mouth, that was ready to break out into a smile, also showed a fine, silky, pale down which the sun was gilding a little.

The calm river grew wider; the atmosphere was warm and perfectly still, but a murmur of life seemed to fill all space.

My neighbour raised her eyes again, and this time, as I was still looking at her, she smiled decidedly. She was charming, and in her passing glance I saw a thousand things, which I had hitherto been ignorant of, for I perceived unknown depths, all the charm of tenderness, all the poetry which we dream of, all the happiness which we are continually in search of. I felt an insane longing to open my arms and to carry her off somewhere, so as to whisper the sweet music of words of love into her ears.

I was just about to address her when somebody touched me on the shoulder, and as I turned round in some surprise, I saw an ordinary-looking man, who was neither young nor old, and who gazed at me sadly.

“I should like to speak to you,” he said.

I made a grimace, which he no doubt saw, for he added:

“It is a matter of importance.”

I got up, therefore, and followed him to the other end of the boat and then he said:

“Monsieur, when winter comes, with its cold, wet and snowy weather, your doctor says to you constantly: ‘Keep your feet warm, guard against chills, colds, bronchitis, rheumatism and pleurisy.’

“Then you are very careful, you wear flannel, a heavy greatcoat and thick shoes, but all this does not prevent you from passing two months in bed. But when spring returns, with its leaves and flowers, its warm, soft breezes and its smell of the fields, all of which causes you vague disquiet and causeless emotion, nobody says to you:

“‘Monsieur, beware of love! It is lying in ambush everywhere; it is watching for you at every corner; all its snares are laid, all its weapons are sharpened, all its guiles are prepared! Beware of love! Beware of love! It is more dangerous than brandy, bronchitis or pleurisy! It never forgives and makes everybody commit irreparable follies.’

“Yes, monsieur, I say that the French Government ought to put large public notices on the walls, with these words: ‘Return of spring. French citizens, beware of love!’ just as they put: ‘Beware of paint: However, as the government will not do this, I must supply its place, and I say to you: ‘Beware of love!’ for it is just going to seize you, and it is my duty to inform you of it, just as in Russia they inform any one that his nose is frozen.”

I was much astonished at this individual, and assuming a dignified manner, I said:

“Really, monsieur, you appear to me to be interfering in a matter which is no concern of yours.”

He made an abrupt movement and replied:

“Ah! monsieur, monsieur! If I see that a man is in danger of being drowned at a dangerous spot, ought I to let him perish? So just listen to my story and you will see why I ventured to speak to you like this.

“It was about this time last year that it occurred. But, first of all, I must tell you that I am a clerk in the Admiralty, where our chiefs, the commissioners, take their gold lace as quill-driving officials seriously, and treat us like forecastle men on board a ship. Well, from my office I could see a small bit of blue sky and the swallows, and I felt inclined to dance among my portfolios.  My yearning for freedom grew so intense that, in spite of my repugnance, I went to see my boss, a short, bad-tempered man, who was always in a rage. When I told him that I was not well, he looked at me and said: ‘I do not believe it, monsieur, but be off with you! Do you think that any office can go on with clerks like you?’ I started at once and went down the Seine. It was a day like this, and I took the Mouche, to go as far as Saint Cloud. Ah! what a good thing it would have been if my chief had refused me permission to leave the office that day!

“I seemed to myself to expand in the sun. I loved everything—the steamer, the river, the trees, the houses and my fellow-passengers. I felt inclined to kiss something, no matter what; it was love, laying its snare. Presently, at the Trocadero, a girl, with a small parcel in her hand, came on board and sat down opposite me. She was decidedly pretty, but it is surprising, monsieur, how much prettier women seem to us when the day is fine at the beginning of the spring. Then they have an intoxicating charm, something quite peculiar about them. It is just like drinking wine after cheese.

“I looked at her and she also looked at me, but only occasionally, as that girl did at you, just now; but at last, by dint of looking at each other constantly, it seemed to me that we knew each other well enough to enter into conversation, and I spoke to her and she replied. She was decidedly pretty and nice and she intoxicated me, monsieur!

“She got out at Saint-Cloud, and I followed her. She went and delivered her parcel, and when she returned the boat had just started. I walked by her side, and the warmth of the ‘air made us both sigh. ‘It would be very nice in the woods,’ I said. ‘Indeed, it would!’ she replied. ‘Shall we go there for a walk, mademoiselie?’

“She gave me a quick upward look, as if to see exactly what I was like, and then, after a little hesitation, she accepted my proposal, and soon we were there, walking side by side. Under the foliage, which was still rather scanty, the tall, thick, bright green grass was inundated by the sun, and the air was full of insects that were also making love to one another, and birds were singing in all directions. My companion began to jump and to run, intoxicated by the air and the smell of the country, and I ran and jumped, following her example. How silly we are at times, monsieur!

“Then she sang unrestrainedly a thousand things, opera airs and the song of Musette! The song of Musette! How poetical it seemed to me, then! I almost cried over it. Ah! Those silly songs make us lose our heads; and, believe me, never marry a woman who sings in the country, especially if she sings the song of Musette!

“She soon grew tired, and sat down on a grassy slope, and I sat at her feet and took her hands, her little hands, that were so marked with the needle, and that filled me with emotion. I said to myself:

“‘These are the sacred marks of toil.’ Oh! monsieur, do you know what those sacred marks of toil mean? They mean all the gossip of the workroom, the whispered scandal, the mind soiled by all the filth that is talked; they mean lost chastity, foolish chatter, all the wretchedness of their everyday life, all the narrowness of ideas which belongs to women of the lower orders, combined to their fullest extent in the girl whose fingers bear the sacred marks of toil.

“Then we looked into each other’s eyes for a long while. Oh! what power a woman’s eye has! How it agitates us, how it invades our very being, takes possession of us, and dominates us! How profound it seems, how full of infinite promises! People call that looking into each other’s souls! Oh! monsieur, what humbug! If we could see into each other’s souls, we should be more careful of what we did. However, I was captivated and was crazy about her and tried to take her into my arms, but she said: ‘Paws off!’. Then I knelt down and opened my heart to her and poured out all the affection that was suffocating me. She seemed surprised at my change of manner and gave me a sidelong glance, as if to say, ‘Ah! so that is the way women make a fool of you, old fellow! Very well, we will see.’

“In love, monsieur, we are always novices, and women artful dealers.

“No doubt I could have had her, and I saw my own stupidity later, but what I wanted was not a woman’s person, it was love, it was the ideal. I was sentimental, when I ought to have been using my time to a better purpose.

“As soon as she had had enough of my declarations of affection, she got up, and we returned to Saint-Cloud, and I did not leave her until we got to Paris; but she had looked so sad as we were returning, that at last I asked her what was the matter. ‘I am thinking,’ she replied, ‘that this has been one of those days of which we have but few in life.’ My heart beat so that it felt as if it would break my ribs.

“I saw her on the following Sunday, and the next Sunday, and every Sunday. I took her to Bougival, Saint-Germain, Maisons-Lafitte, Poissy; to every suburban resort of lovers.

“The little jade, in turn, pretended to love me, until, at last, I altogether lost my head, and three months later I married her.

“What can you expect, monsieur, when a man is a clerk, living alone, without any relations, or any one to advise him? One says to one’s self: ‘How sweet life would be with a wife!’

“And so one gets married and she calls you names from morning till night, understands nothing, knows nothing, chatters continually, sings the song of Musette at the, top of her voice (oh! that song of Musette, how tired one gets of it!); quarrels with the charcoal dealer, tells the janitor all her domestic details, confides all the secrets of her bedroom to the neighbour’s servant, discusses her husband with the tradespeople and has her head so stuffed with stupid stories, with idiotic superstitions, with extraordinary ideas and monstrous prejudices, that I—for what I have said applies more particularly to myself—shed tears of discouragement every time I talk to her.”

He stopped, as he was rather out of breath and very much moved, and I looked at him, for I felt pity for this poor, artless devil, and I was just going to give him some sort of answer, when the boat stopped. We were at Saint-Cloud.

The little woman who had so taken my fancy rose from her seat in order to land. She passed close to me, and gave me a sidelong glance and a furtive smile, one of those smiles that drive you wild. Then she jumped on the landing-stage. I sprang forward to follow her, but my neighbour laid hold of my arm. I shook myself loose, however, whereupon he seized the skirt of my coat and pulled me back, exclaiming: “You shall not go! you shall not go!” in such a loud voice that everybody turned round and laughed, and I remained standing motionless and furious, but without venturing to face scandal and ridicule, and the steamboat started.

The little woman on the landing-stage looked at me as I went off with an air of disappointment, while my persecutor rubbed his hands and whispered to me:

“You must acknowledge that I have done you a great service.”

**Butterfly Wings - A short story**

**Details**

Written by Written by Hifsa Ashraf Edited by Lynne Hand

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Nazir had been sitting in the park since morning. He was staring at the flowers, they were in full bloom, a welcome sign of the spell cast by spring. These brightly coloured flowers with their heady fragrance were enticing all the tiny creatures who had made their homes  in the shrubs, trees, flowers, and grass. Among these creatures, there were butterflies, all with brightly coloured wings, flitting among the flowers, each trying to outdo the other with their aerial acrobatics.

He had always been fascinated by the sights and smells of the park, here he reminisced about the past where it had seemed that there was peace, love, and prosperity all around.  He was particularly attracted to the colourful wings of the butterflies, and from time to time, he actually tried to catch one, but he never succeeded, they were simply too fast and too agile.

The area he was growing up in was impoverished, basically a slum, and the constant, unrelenting poverty not only stunted his body, it suffocated his soul.

Being the youngest of eight siblings, he was often last in the queue for any attention or care from his parents. He would leave his tumble down home every day, with empty eyes that held no hope. With his clumsy, hobbling gait, picking his way through the rubbish strewn street, he always chose the longest path to reach the school gates.

He had no intrinsic motivation to attend school, the poor condition of the school building and slanderous behavior of the teachers meant he often bunked off, and whenever possible he delayed his arrival for as long as possible. He was often physically punished by his teachers, but that held no fear for him, and his only regret when he was caught was that they would be watching him for a while. The only thing that made his life worth living was the park near the school.  It was a well known refuge for many lost souls.

He would be drawn to the park at least once or twice a week, and he spent many hours there.  It was a refuge from the piles of rubbish, the filth, the polluted air, the clamor of vehicles, the stench of poor drainage and the appalling news of bomb blasts and terrorist attacks.   Apart from the peace and quiet it afforded, he was fascinated by the colourful butterflies. He longed to hold one in his palm and to be able to touch its jewel like wings.

He was never interested in going home either.  He felt there was nothing there for him but disappointment, and deprivation. After leaving the park, he felt cheerful and energetic, his heart was lifted, but as soon as he neared his home, it was always  the same, his feet began to feel like lead weights; he knew what awaited him: The vicious arguments between his parents about money upset him the most, the constant shifting of blame and the abusive language, it was mortifying.

With the passing of time, he was slowly becoming immune to the upset, and able to filter out the raised voices. He tried to keep busy, but ended up spending most of his time trying to keep out of everyone's way; daydreaming, or playing with the other barefoot urchins.  His parents seemed to have no interest in his studies, they were too tangled up in the labyrinth of meeting the basic needs of their family.  He had been taken to the welfare school by his older brother, who had really been projecting his own desires; as the eldest he  had been expected to contribute to the family finances and as a result had been unable to attend school himself and was determined that Nazir would succeed where he had failed.

Nazir’s mother often scolded him for his untidy appearance, and scruffy uniform, but it was impossible to keep it clean and tidy.  He did not really mind or feel bad about his mother’s behavior towards him, he accepted it as part of his life. The only things that he truly feared were the bomb blasts.  He had never experienced one at close hand, but he had heard a number of stories from his elder brothers and other street boys.  He felt they must be exaggerating, but they terrified him nonetheless.

One day, on his way back from school after a particularly arduous day, he suddenly decided to follow one of the colourful butterflies, to see where it went and find out where they lived.  It was getting late, so he ran towards the park, hoping the butterflies would still be there.  Entering the park, he whooped for joy as he saw a few butterflies were lazily flying over the flowers. He targeted one and instead of running around trying to catch it, he followed it until suddenly it seemed to disappear. He found himself standing under a huge, old Banyan tree, its long, twisted roots like a kind of mystical writing, as if the tree were trying to tell him something really important. Suddenly, he felt mentally and physically exhausted.  All thoughts of catching his butterfly forgotten, he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

He awoke all of a sudden, for a moment he forgot where he was, a loud sound had driven him from his deep sleep, a sound that had also shaken everything in the park.  He thought there might have been an earthquake, it seemed as if everything was moving around, but then as if through a fog, he heard the sound of sirens, and a cacophony of human voices yelling, crying, and screaming for help.

He stood up and ran towards the main gate of the park. There he found a large crowd of people on the main road watching volunteers and rescue teams rushing around. He walked in a daze through dust and smoke, until he found himself in the affected area: smoke and ashes were billowing around burning vehicles.  Everything he had heard about terrorist attacks came back to him.  He felt as if all the blood had drained out of his body, and he had a feeling of being, elsewhere.  He had never thought that he would be a witness to one of his brother’s stories.

He only came out of his trance when a pair of hands suddenly grabbed him, pulling him backwards. He realised he had been walking towards waves of fire. He looked around, but couldn’t see who had grabbed him in the chaos all around.

Stumbling, he rushed back to the refuge of the park, but that too was full of smoke from the blast. With tear filled eyes, he began to touch each flower, as if he was trying to comfort them, consoling them before they wilted in the toxic air. Near the old Banyan tree, he saw something moving in the grass. It was one of the blue, shiny butterflies, but it was dying in the thick smoke, one wing hanging loose.

Tenderly, he picked it up, and held it on his palm, caressing it with his fingers, but he felt no excitement at having achieved his goal to hold and touch the wings of a butterfly. Slowly the wings stopped moving, and he dug a small hole under the Banyan tree with his fingers. As the tears rolled down his cheeks, he placed its small broken body inside, and covered it, stroking the earth into a small mound.

With a heavy heart he headed back to the main gate of the park, staring at his fingers where the earth and butterfly’s wings had left the mixed colours of death and grief.

**Short Story - The Black Hole**

**Details**

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The Black Hole

DAN'S on the bus with Valbon heading to the Derbyshire market town of Ashbourne. They've taken the bus because they are going to watch the annual Shrovetide football match and parking will be difficult.

The Shrovetide football is played every year on Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday but it's not proper football, not like Man U or Chelsea.

There are two teams, the Up'Ards and Down'Ards, determined by which side side of the Henmore brook they were born on. Those born on the South are Down'ards and try to goal the cork-filled ball at the old Clifton Mill, those born on the North are Up'ards and try to goal the ball at the old Sturston Mill three miles away. A ball is goaled when it is tapped three times onto a stone plinths.

The town becomes a giant football pitch, with shops boarded up to protect them from the giant scrums (known as hugs).

As the packed single decker bus chugs its way up and down the hills through the picturesque villages of Brailsford and Kirk Langley, Dan stares out of the window, reflecting back on the night a couple of weeks ago when he flagged down Valbon's taxi.

It had been another heavy drinking session for Dan, a 35 year old middle ranking civil servant in the county council housing department, once described by his mother as well-turned out and handsome, with his neat brown hair, clear blue eyes and slightly swarthy complexion but now a dishevelled, crumpled individual.

The taxi driver was a bubbly, chatty character despite a limited grasp of English and Dan was in that buoyant frame of mind before the black dog took over.

“Hey mister, you know Ashbourne football?” Valbon asked as he steered the taxi into the nondescript estate where Dan lived.

“Sure do pal,” he replied and before he knew it, Dan had agreed to be Valbon's unofficial tour guide.

Valbon balances a flask of tea on his knee as the bus rolls pass the turn-off to the quaint village of Osmaston with its glorious thatched cottages and offers Dan a cup but he declines and instead takes a swig from a brandy bottle.

“You got wife, kiddies?” asks Valbon, an Albanian Kosovan in his early 50s, short and squat, a sort of Balkan Danny Devito with a large purple birthmark which covers half of his face.

“No, no wife, no kids. You?”

Valbon gazes down at his feet as he tells Dan that he fled the Kosovan War after his wife and three daughters were killed in a massacre whilst he was off fighting the Serbs.

Dan turns his head away, back out to the green, rolling hills of England and realises what a contrast this must be for his companion to the barbaric killing fields of his homeland.

“I come from a very bad place Mister Dan, a very bad place. No rules, no rules for anybody. UK much nicer, you Brits nice people.”

The sun beams across Valbon's face and he taps Dan on the knee.

“You very lucky chappie Mister Dan, live in nice place, nice life. But you need wife, kiddies, everybody needs wife, kiddies. Why no wife Mister Dan?”

Dan doesn't reply.

“Black cloud over your head, big black cloud, I can see that. What happened Mister Dan? You can tell me, I been to hell and back matey. I have seen many terrible things but you, you have seen bad things as well haven't you, I can tell. You have that look, many men in Kosovo have that look. You come close to the horror, see it face to face.”

Dan decides that his best bet is to lose Valbon in the crowd and head to a boozer.

The bus arrives shortly before midday in time for them to see the throng gather outside The Green Man and Black's Royal Hotel where the pre-game lunch is held. There is a huge cheer when a local dignitary emerges carrying the ball and is held aloft on the shoulders of the some of the players. There is a buzz of excitement as the ball is carried down Dig Street, red and white bunting fluttering above from rooftop to rooftop, towards a plinth in the Shaw Croft, near to the town's main car park from where the game will be started.

“Come Mister Dan, come.” Valbon tugs Dan's coat sleeve and they are swept along by the tide of people.

Before the ball is thrown to the crowd – the grey-suited, grey-haired VIP leads everyone into a rendition of Auld Lang Syne followed by the National Anthem. Dan is not particularly patriotic but is embarrassed into action by Valbon who sings 'God save our gracious Queen' as loudly as anyone there, proudly clutching his right fist to his left shoulder.

“This my country now. I am British citizen. Proud man,” he says. “No killing here, no nasties.”

The game gets underway and the ball is quickly lost in the scrum, burly men and shaven headed youths dressed in tracksuits, rugby jerseys and t-shirts showing their allegiance, battle it out.

A group breaks away with the ball and the action switches into the river, the crowd running in pursuit. Like spectators watching a gladiatorial contest in ancient Rome, their bloodlust has risen and they bay ferociously in appreciation of the combat going on before them. Occasionally the action borders on turning into a brawl but tempers remain under control.  
The game edges east across Park Road towards the Sturston goal and Dan hopes that Valbon will follow so he can nip away.

Suddenly he hears a rumble. It has been an unusually warm day for the time of the year but there have been no forecast of rain or thunder.  
“What's that?” asked Valbon, stopping in his tracks.

The rumble becomes louder, much louder and the sky begins to fill with birds in flight. The next moment the ground beneath them shakes as if a giant Peak District troll has decided to march into Ashbourne. This is followed by a enormous grating sound and about a hundred yards ahead of them, the road splits open with spectacular speed as if it was a can of sardines, sending scores of people tumbling into its cavity.

They rush back in the direction of the town centre as the awful stench of what smells like rotten eggs begins to invade their nostrils. Buildings all around are starting to shake and huge dust clouds mushroom skywards to obliterate the sun.

They run down St John Street into the cobbled market place to witness the fine array of Georgian buildings in Church Street ahead of them collapsing like a pack of cards as a great big ditch splits the street in two.

“Where police, ambulance? Nobody here Mister Dan, nobody here. Why?” cries Valbon, sweat cascading down his face.

Dan hears Valbon scream just before a large chuck of masonry strikes him on the side of the head.

Many years ago when Dan was a child, his mother used to take him to a picturesque copper-topped bandstand with a wooden balustrade in the the local part to hear a brass band perform. It was where she could re-live her favourite film, The Music Man, with Robert Preston and his 76 trombones.

It was here, 15 years ago that he took Sylvia to propose to her. It was a spur of the moment thing, not the proposal, but the place. Dan had intended to do it in the Italian restaurant where they were dining but it was crowded and he was too embarrassed.

So on their way back to their car they passed the park and on a sudden impulse he steered Sylvia through the giant iron gates.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Don't worry, it's a bit of a surprise.”

“But Dan, it's night-time and it's dark,” she replied.

“It's okay, I just want to take you to the bandstand, there are lights there.”

But when they got there, the lights weren't working and the bandstand was shrouded in darkness.

Undeterred, Dan took out his cigarette lighter, lit it and bent down on his knees before her.

He didn't get the chance to utter 'will you' before a blow came crashing down into the small of his back, flinging him to the ground.

There were three of them, Dan could hardly work out their features in the gloom but they were swigging from bottles and leering at Sylvia.

“What do you reckon guys? Was he going to do the business?” said the taller of the three, who must have been no more than 18 or 19. He had the demeanour of a scavenger, thin and tall with weasel eyes, pointed nose and acne-riddled skin. The other two were younger, smaller and less menacing, in awe of the ring-leader.

Dan remained where he was, cowering on the ground as he caught a glimpse of flashing steel.

One of them roughly searched through Dan's jacket pockets and pulled out the box containing the ring.

“He was you know,” the scavenger said as he peered into Dan's face, his breath stinking of stale beer.

The other two giggled nervously and Sylvia screamed before a hand came roughly across her mouth and she was dragged into the bandstand.

She clutched the bandstand rail screaming: “Dan, don't leave me!”

“Dan, don't leave me!”

His senses kick-start back into action and he is conscious of a large bump on the side of his head.

Valbon is stuck on a tiny ledge about four or five feet down inside a giant hole which has completely swallowed up the town's information centre. Dan can't see how deep the hole is but there is an icy chill gushing up from its depths and he hear the rat-ta-tat tat chatter of Valbon's teeth.

Every nerve-end in his body is telling him to run, to flee from this madness, to save himself, as he had done all those years ago when he had fled the park. But he doesn't.

Back then he had run into the street trying to flag down passing cars but to no avail. The first phone box he went to was wrecked and the next. He banged on a couple of doors but made such a commotion that, looking back, he was not surprised he was ignored.

It wasn't until he reached the high street and ran into a pub did anybody listen to him.

The look of contempt was clearly evident on the policeman's face when about two hours later he took Dan into a small, shabby interview room at the police station to inform him that Sylvia's body had been found less than a mile from the bandstand.

“Mister Dan! Please help me!”

Dan's head is pulsating with pain but he bends down and manages to grasp Valbon's hand and haul him up.

“Thank you!” sobs the Kosovan. “What's happening, what is all this? What...”

“I don't know, I haven't got a clue, an earthquake, some sort of disaster but we don't have earthquakes on this scale. There's something not right about all this. Let's get out of here,” says Dan.

They head up Buxton Hill, the main road north out of Ashbourne, leading towards Dove Dale, the beginning of the Peak District and much higher ground.

As they reached the top just before The Bowling Green Inn, the noise behind them builds up into a deafening crescendo.

They turn and look back down the hill. The road is being ripped up straight down the middle at an alarming rate, an enormous black hole moving towards them with deadly precision.

Valbon drops to his knees, whispering frantically in Albanian, bruised and battered body limp in submission as the horror approaches.

Dan stands firm, head held high. He is control, there is no fear.

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**Short Story - The Anchor**

**Details**

Parent Category: [English Stories](https://english-magazine.org/english-stories/60-english-stories)

Category: [Short Stories](https://english-magazine.org/english-stories)

The Anchor

by Patrick O'Connor

IT was a bustling city centre despite the unseasonally chilly May air and clinging drizzle, with the usual shopping brands swamping both sides of the pedestrianised walkway.

Jet black steel and wooden benches were regularly placed along the route to provide weary shoppers with a momentary respite, waddling gluttonous pigeons in close attention.

About halfway down, towards the entrance to the cavernous shopping centre, a pony-tailed busker, positioned between two Victorian style globe street lights, plied his trade, willing passers-by to make a donation, no matter how small, as an acknowledgement of his skills as a saxophone player. It was mid-morning but so far he had only earned £4.50.

A slim, elegantly dressed woman in her early 30s, with silky brown hair in a bob, the epitome of chic, paused a few feet away from the busker and called out to two young boys who were straggling a few yards behind her.

“Sebastien, Claude, come and listen,” she said in a gentle, sweet-toned accent which betrayed just a hint of her French origins.

The boys, who were twins with striking, flowing blond locks, joined their mother who was racking her brains to try and place the tune the man was playing. She felt she had definitely heard it before.

They stood attentively and when the man stopped, Sylvie smiled at him and gave Claude a 10p coin to drop into a black baseball hat which was lying on the ground.

“Come boys, let's go,” she said as she ushered the twins in front of her.

When they were a few feet away, Claude looked up at his mother and whispered “Maman, that man smelt funny.”

All three started laughing and giggling, not realising that behind them the busker had dropped to his knees, his bright red Selmer Mark VI tenor saxophone with its ornate butterfly decorations, clanging on the pavement. Tears began to pour down his cheeks as the woman and her sons entered the shopping centre.

Lonsdale hadn't noticed the pub before but in his desperation to get a drink he wasn't that fussed as to where he went.

It was situated down an alleyway by the side of a large, imposing church which towered above it, separated by a brick wall and rusty steel railing and looked from the outside the sort of spit and sawdust boozer he liked to frequent. Above the pub, which was called The Anchor, hung a withered, windswept flower bed arrangement.

The door creaked slightly as he entered the establishment's solitary room which was sparsely populated and walked across a sticky tiled floor to the bar.

Lonsdale was 64, 5ft 7in tall, of wiry build, with spindly legs but a large protruding belly, out of synch with the rest of his proportions. He had silvery grey hair tied into rather minuscule pony tail and sported a goatee beard on a face littered with red blotchy patches. He was dressed in black drainpipe jeans, black T-shirt, a tatty multi-coloured fleece, black baseball hat and on both wrists sported a multitude of coloured bead bracelets. Over his shoulder he carried a black saxophone case.

Behind the bar was a shaven head, smooth-skinned man in his mid-40s. He was about 5ft 11in tall, slim, wearing an orange t-shirt and red jeans. The barman had an oval face, large clear blue eyes and a big beaming smile which sparkled into action as he said: “Yes mate?”

“Pint of Pedigree and large Bushmills,” said Lonsdale as he rested a red basketball boot with white laces on the faded bronze bar foot rail. He was tempted to pick a newspaper from a brown wooden rack but noticed that they were all faded and out of date.

The barman turned his head slightly to look upwards at a cream circular wall clock with its Roman numerals showing the time as 11.37am.

“You sure sir?”

“Of course I'm sure bud, are you in the business of serving drinks or not?” rasped Lonsdale with the husky growl of a seasoned smoker.

The barman poured the drinks and placed them on the bar in front of Lonsdale who downed the whiskey in one go before tackling the pint with equal gusto.

“Drinking to forget sir?”

Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Grover Washington Jnr, saxophone maestros every one of them but his memory had gradually deteriorated over the last few years so that when Sylvie turned up he was down to only one tune in his repertoire. He had forgotten all the rest.

A busker turning out the same tune over and over again, even if it was Junior Walker's soul classic What Does It Take To Win Your Love, wasn't going to make much money.

Oh the irony of it, what does it take to win your love Sylvie, pondered Lonsdale.

His right hand was shaking as he counted out the coins to pay for his next round of drinks, eyes struggling to focus to make sure he'd got enough money.

“Keep em coming bud,” he mumbled. His heartbeat was bouncing all over the place as he gingerly pulled a bar stool over and carefully plonked himself down.

What does it take to win your love, eh...

When he first saw her 10 years ago she was 24, gliding effortlessly around like a gazelle at Progres, the trendy cafe she worked in, in that most trendy of Paris locations, Montmartre.

The band he was playing in, serving up a natty jazz/blues/soul collection, had just finished four nights worth of gigs in the city and he was on his own, downing a double espresso to try and bat away a devastating hangover.

Sylvie looked the spitting image of the 60s French beatnik singer Francoise Hardy, a classier Marianne Faithful, the archetypal Rive Gauche girl, even though she was from Montpellier.

Long, straight, light brown hair cascaded down over her shoulders but above all else there was those gorgeous deep brown eyes which beckoned seductively. Long, luscious legs were cocooned in tight jeans which provided the perfect contours for a bottom designed by a God determined to tempt the male sex into madness.

Lonsdale was 30 years older than her, and at 5ft 11in, she stood four inches taller than him but within three weeks she had flown to England to move in with him.

Of course it couldn't last, deep down he always knew that but for a while life with Sylvie was bliss. She travelled with the band and the rest of the guys loved her as he knew they would. Nobody mentioned the age gap and neither did she until the day she left, almost two years after Lonsdale had first met her.

Erwin was an Austrian banker she met walking in the park whilst Lonsdale was sleeping off another hangover. He was rich, handsome in a conventional sort of way and her own age. Lonsdale was devastated, he felt that her bohemian roots and lifestyle and his total and utter devotion were catapulted aside for marriage, respectability and financial security.

He pined like nobody had ever pined before, he got pining down to perfection, he pined until his pining was pure. Drink, already a vital part of his existence, became his crutch, his physical decline rapid. Eventually the band got fed up with his tantrums, failure to turn up and general lack of professionalism and he was axed.

Busking became his only option but even that became a precarious existence as the booze took hold and he was already plummeting towards rock bottom by the time she had stood in front of him less than an hour before, the first time he had seen her since she departed.

It didn't surprise him that she was one of those French women who never seem to lose their looks. She was still gorgeous but what shattered him to the core was that she didn't recognise him. It was only eight years for God's sake, had he changed that much? Her only gesture was to get her son to throw 10p into his hat. 10p? Was that all he was worth?

Lonsdale couldn't tell how long it had taken him to unburden himself to the barman but as his speech became more and more slurred, he slumped into a swamp of darkness, sobbing and whimpering, words stumbling out in a fountain of dribble, bloodshot eyes reddened even further by constant rubbing.

The final straw in this sorry tale of lost love was the fact that Sylvie ended the affair with a short, emotionless letter: grown apart...different aspirations...time to move on... and of course, his drinking.

As the barman stood expressionless, hands firmly placed on the bar, Lonsdale's curses about Sylvie and her 'betrayal' ricocheted noisily around the room like fireflies on a summer's evening.

Eventually he felt spent, devoid of words, now it was time to disappear completely into his own personal Bushmills Bermuda Triangle.

His pockets were empty, he knew that, so he let his eyes do his pleading. No response, nothing.

“Look, I suppose you couldn't let me set up a tab, I'll pay you tomorrow, promise.”

Bud shook his head.

“I'll do anything bud...anything...anything you want.”

Again the polite refusal.

After a silent stand-off, the barman spoke in a gentle, almost whispering fashion: “So, you really loved her?”

“Yes, of course, I...”

“Loved her? Or loved the idea of what she did for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“How did you feel when she left you?”

Rage was bubbling back to the surface like a Cruise missile.

“I told you.. .told you...” he snapped.

“Were you happy for her when she told she'd met someone else?”

“Are you stupid, course not.”

“But you loved her?”

“Yes.”

“And this man made her happy?”

“Hmm, yes I suppose so.”

“So if you truly loved her why weren't you happy that she was happy?”

Lonsdale opened his mouth to reply but the barman held up a hand and said: “At that moment you were thinking totally about yourself, nobody else, not the woman you professed to love, but about yourself, about what she could do for you. You talk about love but your actions were totally selfish, it was all about you, you, you, your misery.”

Lonsdale grasped the pint glass and let the last mouthful of froth run around his lips before it trickled down his throat.

“Do you know where that gets you my friend, it gets you here with this lot. Turn around, take a good long look at them and tell me what you see.”

Lonsdale swivelled hesitantly on the bar stool so that he was facing the other people in the pub.

Only now did it dawn on him that none of them had come to the bar the entire time he had been talking to the barman. It also dawned on him that no-one else in the room had been talking, they all sat alone at individual tables. It was a grey, murky interior with faded, anonymous prints on the walls. It was almost as if a foggy rain mist had seeped inside to cloud his vision, the room seemed to be getting darker.

By the door sat a beanpole of a man in his mid-20s, slim built with light brown reddish hair, straggly beard and dead sullen eyes. He was 'playing drum' with his fingers on the table but there was no sound forthcoming.

Just in front of Lonsdale was a podgy man in his 50s, immaculately dressed in a green, red and brown checked 'Rupert Bear' type suit and wearing a brown bowler hat and regimental tie.

He had The Times crossword on his lap and was speedily filling it in. Lonsdale leaned across and noticed that the man was simply entering gibberish.

There was a woman in her 30s, petite and gaunt in a khaki beige gabardine trench coat with mousy untidy hair and largish nose on a plain, tired looking face. She had a plain sandwich and a packet of cheese and onion crisps and was tearing off the non-crusty bits of the bread and putting the crisps inside to make a butty. But she then put the food back on the plate and stared at it without making any attempt to eat.

Finally by the door sat a large woman in her 60s, with long blue skirt, green cardigan and support stockings which were rolled around swollen ankles. Her grey hair was tied back in a severe bun and she was crocheting as fast as her fingers could work.

Lonsdale continued to peruse them before turning back to the barman and saying: “They not drinking?”

There wasn't a glass to be seen.

“No, they can't any more.”

“But why, why are they in here?”

“They have no choice.”

“I don't understand.”

“You will Lonsdale.”

The busker felt a shudder ripple through his body. He could have been wrong of course, he had been drinking heavily but he didn't think he had ever told the barman his name.

“Look at them even closer, they were all like you, dying a slow, painful death because they were self-obsessed, because they couldn't break the habit.

“Drinking led them here, seeking out that next drink. Excuse me for the non-absolute metaphor but this was their Last Chance Saloon.”

At this point the people in the bar looked up and nodded at Lonsdale, an expressionless, soulless nod but an acknowledgement of his presence nevertheless.

“But they didn't take it Lonsdale, they didn't take their last chance. They were unwilling to put their friends, families, lovers or the people they damaged first and that's why they're still here. This is where you stay if you don't take your last chance. Somehow you have been fortunate enough to find your way here. Take this last chance.”

There was an explosion inside Lonsdale's head and he buried his skull in his hands. Like a jigsaw piece, everything fell into place. It was almost as if he could rise out of his body and examine his life, his actions with the forensic detachment of a scientist. All the mistakes, the anger, the self-destruction, all laid out before him in clinical detail.

“Help me, please help me,” he sobbed.

“I can steer you in the right direction but that's all I can do, the rest is up to you. Instead of wallowing in self-pity over Sylvie and letting that tear you apart, be grateful that you met her, that your paths crossed and that you had time together.”

The barman leaned across the bar counter and took hold of Lonsdale's trembling hand.

“Use your memories of your time together as a positive thing, rather than a negative. Make them happy memories and rejoice in the thought that she is happy now, that she is a mother with wonderful young and healthy children. Be happy for her Lonsdale. Cherish that thought and move on with your own life.”

A week later Lonsdale sauntered down the sun-soaked alleyway and entered The Anchor to find a packed pub buzzing with chatter and laughter, a blackboard containing a selection of organic, home produced dishes and a dartboard.

Behind the bar was a barmaid in her 50s, slightly on the plumpish side but with a pleasing, wholesome smile that radiated warmth as he approached her.

Lonsdale described the barman and asked when he was next on but the barmaid said that no-one of that description had ever worked at The Anchor.

“What will it be duckie?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye kick-starting long dormant senses into attention.

“Orange juice please.”

**Short Story - The Interview**

**Details**

Parent Category: [English Stories](https://english-magazine.org/english-stories/60-english-stories)

Category: [Short Stories](https://english-magazine.org/english-stories)

A young man went to apply for a managerial position in a big company. He passed the initial tests and panel interview, and then had to meet the director for the final interview.

The director discovered from his CV that the youth's academic achievements were excellent, so he asked, "Did you obtain any scholarships?"  The young man answered "no".

"Was it your father who paid for you to go to college?"

"My father passed away when I was young, it was my mother who paid for my education.” he replied.

"Where did your mother work?"

"She took in washing," replied the young man, blushing at what this important man must think of such menial work.

The director asked him to show him his hands. He looked at a pair of hands that were smooth, and strong and perfectly manicured.

"Have you ever helped your mother wash the clothes before?" he asked.

"Never, my mother always wanted me to study and read more books. Besides, she can wash clothes much better than me."

The director said, "You seem to be an excellent candidate, but I have a request. When you go home today, go and clean your mother's hands, and then come back and see me tomorrow morning."

The young man felt that his chances of landing the job were very high, and went home feeling jubilant.  When he got home, he remembered what the director had said and he fetched a bowl of water, some soap and a flannel and asked his mother to let him wash her hands. His mother felt strange at this request.  Happy, but with mixed feelings, she offered her hands to her son.

He cleaned his mother's hands slowly, and as he did so tears started to roll down his face. It was the first time he had noticed that his mother's hands were so wrinkled, the knuckles were swollen and gnarled, and there were so many small abrasions and bruises on them. Some abrasions were so painful that his mother winced when he touched them.

For the first time he realized that it was this pair of hands that had done laundry for strangers day after day to enable him to go to college and university. The injuries to his mother's hands were the price that his mother had had to pay for his education and his future.

After cleaning his mother hands, he quietly washed and ironed all the remaining clothes for her and folded them neatly ready for collection the next day.

That night, mother and son talked for a very long time.

The next morning, he went back to the director's office.

The director noticed the tears that sprang into the young man's eyes, when he asked: "Can you tell me what you learned yesterday when you went home?"

The young man answered," I washed my mother's hands, and also finished washing all the remaining clothes. I know now what appreciation is. Without my mother, I would not be who I am today. By helping my mother I now realize how difficult and tough it is to get something done on your own. And I have come to appreciate the importance and value of helping one’s family."

The director said, "This is what I am looking for in a manager. I want to employ a person who can appreciate the help of others, a person who knows the sufferings of others to get things done, and a person who does not put money as his only goal in life.”

“You are hired.”

He worked very hard, and received the respect of his subordinates. He respected the work of every employee, and worked diligently alongside them as a team.

A child, who has been protected and given whatever he wants, can develop a feeling of "entitlement" and may always put him/herself first. Ignorant of the efforts made by the people around. When such children become adults and start work, they may assume that every person must listen to them, and if they become a manager, they are often unable to understand the day to day struggles of the employees who work for them. These kinds of people, who may be good academically, and may be successful for a while, eventually find no sense of achievement. They will grumble and be forever dissatisfied and always fighting for more.

If we are overprotective parents, are we really showing love, or are we spoiling our children instead?

You can provide your child with a comfortable life in a big house, eating good meals, learning to play the piano, watching movies and playing games on a big screen TV. But when you are cutting the grass, please let them experience it. After a meal, let them wash their plates and bowls together with their brothers and sisters. It is not because you do not have money to hire a maid, it is because you want to love them in the right way.  One of the most important things your child can learn is how to appreciate the effort, and experience the difficulty of day to day life, and to learn how to work with others to get things done.