THE TELEPHONE GAME

Since the conventional separation of the sexes on the evening before a wedding did not appeal to Liese, Tony agreed that there should be a party to which both sides of the wedding came instead. A party was necessary because the formalities of the day would not allow for much of a reunion with friends they had not seen for some time, but they did not wish the reception to be an occasion that went on and on in order to cater for this: they wanted to be in Venice in time for the first dinner of their marriage. So in Tony's flat, already re-arranged for married life, his friends and Liese's mixed jollily in advance, while wine flowed generously and there was background music that was danced to, while tomorrow's bride and groom learnt a little more about one another from what was said. Friendships here were longer than their own.

Tonight, there was a solemnity about Liese's manner that softened further the beauty of her features: her mind was on her marriage. Smooth, pale as wheat, her hair fell to her shoulders; her light-blue eyes were a degree less tranquil than usually they were, but when she smiled all that tranquility came back. 'Oh, Tony, you are lucky,' a cousin who had not met Liese before remarked, and Tony said he knew it. He was fair-haired too, by nature insouciant and humorous, handsome in his way.

In Germany Liese's father was a manufacturer of gloves. In England Tony had been looked after by an aunt ever since his parents died in the worst air disaster of 1977 – the runway collision of two jumbo-jets – when Tony was six, an only child. Nineteen years later he and Liese had met by chance, in a bustling lunchtime restaurant, not far from Victoria Station. 'D'you think we could meet again?' he had pleaded, while a tubby, middle-aged waitress, bringing their coffee in that moment, approved of his boldness and let it show. 00178 was the number on the back of the driver's seat in the first taxi they sat in together, black digits on an oval of white enamel. Afterwards, romantically, they both remembered that, and the taxi-driver's conversation, and the tubby waitress.

Already in love, Liese had heard about the tragedy in 1977, Tony about the gloves that had been the source of livelihood in Liese's family for generations, lambskin and pigskin, goatskin and doeskin. Hand-stitching and dyeing skills, a different way with gussets for the different leathers, were talked about when for the first time Tony visited Schelesnau, when he was shown the long rows of templates and the contented workforce, the knives and thonging tools tidily on their racks. In Schelesnau, driven by love, he played the part required of him, asking questions and showing an interest. Liese was nervous in anticipation before meeting Tony's aunt, who was getting on a bit now in a small South Coast resort with a distant view of the ferries plying back and forth to France. But Liese needn't have been apprehensive. 'She's lovely,' Tony's aunt said, and in Schelesnau – where there were Liese's two younger sisters and a busy family life – Tony was considered charming. There was at first – in Schelesnau and in England - a faint concern that the marriage was taking on a burden that marriage did not always have to, that would have been avoided if Liese had chosen to marry a German or Tony an English girl: after all, there had been

enmity in two terrible wars. It was a vague feeling, very much at odds with the sentiments of the time, and although it hovered like some old, long-discredited ghost, it failed in the end to gain a place in the scheme of things. What did, instead, was the telephone game.

On the night before the wedding it was Tony who suggested playing it. Afterwards, he hardly knew why he did, why he had imagined that Germans would understand the humor of the game, but of course he'd had a certain amount to drink. For her part, Liese wished she had insisted that her wedding party wasn't an occasion for this kind of diversion. 'Oh, Tony!' was her single, half-hearted protest, and Tony didn't hear it.

Already he had explained to Liese's sisters – both of whom were to be bridesmaids – that strangers were telephoned, that you won if you held a stranger in conversation longer than anyone else could. The information was passed around the bewildered Germans, who politely wondered what was coming next.

'I am in engine boats,' a man who had been a classmate of Liese's in Fräulein Groenewold's kindergarten was saying when the music was turned off. 'Outboards, you say?'

He, and all the others – more than thirty still left at the party – were asked to be silent then. A number was dialed by Tony's best man and the first of the strangers informed that there was a gas leak in the street, asked to check the rooms of his house for a tell-tale smell, then to return to the phone with information as to that. The next was told that an external fuse had blown, that all electrical connections should be unplugged or turned off to obviate danger. The next was advised to close and lock his windows against a roving polecat.

'The Water Board here,' Tony said when his turn came. 'We're extremely sorry to ring you so late. We have an emergency.'

Some of the German visitors were still perplexed. 'So they are all your friends?' a girl with a plait asked, in spite of what had been said. 'This is a joke with friends?'

Liese explained again that the people who were telephoned were just anyone. The game was to delay, to keep a conversation going. She whispered, in case her voice should carry to Tony's victim. '*Was? Stimmt irgendwas nicht?*' her friend whispered back, and Liese said it was all just for fun. The last call had lasted three and three-quarter minutes, the one before only a few seconds.

'What we would like you to do,' Tony said, 'is to make your way to the water tanks in your loft and turn off the inlet tap. This tap is usually red, madam, but of course the color may have worn off. What we're endeavoring to do is to prevent the flooding of your house.'

'Flooding?' the woman he spoke to repeated, her voice drowsy with sleep. 'Eh?'

'One of our transformer valves has failed. We have a dangerously high pressure level.'

'I can't go up into the loft at this hour. It's the middle of the night.'

'We're having to ask everyone in the area, madam. Perhaps your husband -'

'I ain't got no husband. I ain't got no one here. I'm seventy-three years of age. How d'you think I'd know about a tap?'

‘We’re sorry for the inconvenience, madam. We naturally would not ask you to do this if it were not necessary. When a transformer valve goes it is a vital matter. The main articulated valve may go next and then of course it is too late. When the articulated valve goes the flood-water could rise to sixteen feet within minutes. In which case I would advise you to keep to the upstairs rooms.’

Tony put the palm of his hand over the mouthpiece. She had beetled off to get a stepladder, he whispered, and a flashlight. He listened again and said there was the mewing of a cat.

‘It’ll be all right now?’ another German girl leaned forward to ask Liese, and the German who was in outboard engines, who perfectly understood the game, gestured with a smile that it would be. The game was amusing, he considered, but not a game to play in Schelesnau. It was sophisticated. It was the famous English sense of humor.

Tony heard the shuffle of footsteps, a door closing in the distance, and in the distance also the mewing of the cat again. Then there was silence.

Tony looked round his guests, some of them, as he was, a little drunk. He laughed, careless now of allowing the sound to pass to the other house, since its lone occupant was presumably already in her loft. He put the receiver down beside the directories on the narrow telephone table, and reached out with a bottle of Sancerre to attend to a couple of empty glasses. A friend he’d been at school with began to tell of an occasion when a man in Hoxton was sent out on to the streets to see if a stolen blue van had just been parked there. He himself had once posed as the proprietor of a ballroom-dancing school, offering six free lessons. Some of the Germans said they must be going now.

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‘Shh.’ Listening again, Tony held up a hand. But there was no sound from the other end. ‘She’s still aloft,’ he said, and put the receiver down beside the directories.

‘Where’re you staying?’ the best man asked, his lips brushing the cheek of the girl with the plait as they danced, the music there again. The telephone game had run its course.

‘In Germany,’ it was explained by the man in outboard motors, ‘we might say this was *Ärgernis*.’

‘Oh, here too,’ an English girl who did not approve of the telephone game said. ‘If that means harassment.’

Those who remained left in a bunch then, the Germans telling about *Wasservexierungsport*, a practical joke involving jets of water. You put your ten pfennigs into a slot machine to bring the lights on in a grotto and found yourself drenched instead. ‘Water-vexing,’ the outboard-motors man translated.

'You could stay here, you know,' Tony said when he and Liese had collected the glasses and the ashtrays, when everything had been washed and dried, the cushions plumped up, a window opened to let in a stream of cold night air.

'But I have yet to finish packing up my things. The morning will be busy.'

They walked about the flat that soon would be their home, going from room to room, although they knew the rooms well. Softly, the music still played, and they danced a little in the small hall, happy to be alone now. The day they'd met there had been an office party in the busy lunchtime restaurant, a lot of noise, and a woman in a spotted red dress quarrelling with her friend at the table next to theirs. How cautious Liese had been that day was afterwards remembered; and how cautious she'd been – much later – when Tony said he loved her. Remembered, too, with that same fondness was how both of them had wanted marriage, not some substitute, how they had wanted the binding of its demands and vows and rigors. London was the city of their romance and it was in London – to the discomfort and annoyance of her parents, defying all convention – that Liese had insisted the marriage should take place.

While they danced, Tony noticed that his telephone receiver was still lying beside the directories. More than half an hour ago he had forgotten about it. He reached to pick it up, bringing their dance to an end. He said:

'She hasn't put hers back.'

Liese took the receiver from him. She listened, too, and heard the empty sound of a connected line. 'Hullo,' she said. 'Hullo.'

'She forgot. She went to bed.'

'Would she forget, Tony?'

'Well, something like it.'

'She give a name? You have the number still?'

Tony shook his head. 'She didn't give a name.' He had forgotten the number; he'd probably never even been aware of it, he said.

'What did she say, Tony?'

'Only that she was without a husband.'

'Her husband was out? At this time?'

They had drawn away from one another. Tony turned the music off. He said:

'She meant she was widowed. She wasn't young. Seventy-three or something like that.'

'This old woman goes to her loft -'

'Well, I mean, she said she would. More likely, she didn't believe a word I said.'

'She went to look for a stepladder and a flashlight. You told us.'

‘I think she said she was cold in her nightdress. More likely, she just went back to bed. I don’t blame her.’

Listening again, Liese said:

‘I can hear the cat.’

But when she passed the receiver over, Tony said he couldn’t hear anything. Nothing whatsoever, he said.

‘Very far away. The cat was mewing, and suddenly it stopped. Don’t put it back!’ Liese cried when Tony was about to return the receiver to its cradle. ‘She is there in her loft, Tony.’

‘Oh, honestly, I don’t think so. Why should she be? It doesn’t take long to turn a stop-cock off.’

‘What is a stop-cock?’

‘Just a way of controlling the water.’

The mewing of the cat came faintly to him, a single mew and then another. Not knowing why he did so, Tony shook his head again, silently denying this sound. Liese said:

‘She could have fallen down. It would be hard to see with her flashlight and she could have fallen down.’

‘No, I don’t think so.’ For the first time in the year and a half she had known him Liese heard a testiness in Tony’s voice. There was no point in not replacing the receiver, he said. ‘Look, let’s forget it, Liese.’

Solemnly, but in distress, Liese gazed into the features of the man she was to marry in just over twelve hours’ time. He smiled a familiar, easy smile. No point, he said again, more softly. No point of any kind in going on about this.

‘Honestly, Liese.’

They had walked about, that first afternoon. He had taken her through Green Park, then down to the river. She was in London to perfect her English; that afternoon she should have been at another class. And it was a quarter past five before Tony explained, untruthfully, his absence from his desk. The next day they met again.

‘Nothing has happened, Liese.’

‘She could be dead.’

‘Oh, Liese, don’t be silly.’

At once, having said that, Tony apologized. Of course she wasn’t silly. That game was silly. He was sorry they’d played it tonight.

‘But, Tony -’

‘Of course she isn’t dead.’

‘Why do you think you can be sure?’

He shook his head, meaning to indicate that he wasn't claiming to be sure, only that reason implied what he suggested. During the months they were getting to know one another he had learnt that Liese's imagination was sometimes a nuisance; she had said so herself. Purposeless and dispensable, she said, a quirk of nature that caused her, too often, to doubt the surface of things. Music was purposeless, he had replied, the petal of a flower dispensable: what failed the market-place was often what should be treasured most. But Liese called her quirk of nature a pest; and experiencing an instance of it for the first time now, Tony understood.

'Let's not quarrel, Liese.'

But the quarrel – begun already while neither noticed – spread, insidious in the stillness that the silent telephone, once more passed from hand to hand, seemed to inspire. Neither heard the mewing of the cat again, and Tony said:

'Look, in the morning she'll see that receiver hanging there and she'll remember she forgot to put it back.'

'It is morning now. Tony, we could go to the police.'

'The *police*? What on earth for?'

'They could find out where that house is.'

'Oh, none of this makes sense!' And Tony, who happened just then to be holding the telephone receiver, would again have replaced it.

Liese snatched it, anger flushing through her cheeks. She asked him why he'd wanted to do that, and he shrugged and didn't answer. He didn't because all this was ridiculous, because he didn't trust himself to say anything.

'The police couldn't find out,' he said after a silence had gone on. The police wouldn't have a telephone number to go on. All they could tell the police was that in a house somewhere in London there was an old woman and a cat. All over London, Tony said, there were old women and cats.

'Tony, try to remember the number.'

'Oh, for God's sake! How can I remember the bloody number when I didn't even know it in the first place?'

'Well, then it will be in the computers.'

'What computers?'

'In Germany all calls go into the computers.'

Liese didn't know if this was so or not. What she knew was that they could do nothing if he had put the receiver back. Why had he wanted to?

'Darling, we can't,' he was saying now. 'We can't just walk round to a police station at nearly three o'clock in the morning to report that an old woman has gone up to her loft. It was a harmless game, Liese.'

She tried to say nothing, but did not succeed. The words came anyway, unchosen, ignoring her will.

'It is a horrible game. How can it not be horrible when it ends like this?'

The old woman lies there, Liese heard her own voice insist. And light comes up through the open trapdoor, and the stepladder is below. There are the dusty boards, the water pipes. The cat's eyes are pinpricks in the gloom.

'Has she struck her head, Tony? And bones go brittle when you're old. I'm saying what could be true.'

'We have no reason whatsoever to believe any of this has happened.'

'The telephone left hanging -'

'She did not replace the telephone because she forgot to.'

'You asked her to come back. You said to do what you asked and to tell you if it was done.'

'Sometimes people can tell immediately that it's a put-up thing.'

'Hullo! Hullo!' Liese agitatedly shouted into the receiver. 'Hullo . . . Please.'

'Liese, we have to wait until she wakes up again.'

'At least the cat will keep the mice away.'

Other people will see the lights left on. Other people will come to the house and find the dangling telephone. Why should an old woman in her night clothes set a stepladder under a trapdoor? The people who come will ask that. They'll give the cat a plate of milk and then they'll put the telephone back, and one of them will climb up the ladder.

'I wish it had happened some other night.'

'Liese –'

'You wanted to put the receiver back. You wanted not to know. You wanted us for ever not to know, to make a darkness of it.'

'No, of course I didn't.'

'Sometimes a person doesn't realize. A person acts in some way and doesn't realize.'

'Please,' Tony begged again and Liese felt his arms around her. Tears for a moment smudged away the room they were in, softly he stroked her hair. When she could speak she whispered through his murmured consolation, repeating that she wished all this had happened sooner, not tonight. As though some illness had struck her, she experienced a throbbing ache, somewhere in her body, she didn't know where. That came from muddle and confusion was what she thought, or else from being torn apart, as if she possessed two selves. There was not room for quarrels between them. There had not been, there was not still. Why had it happened tonight, why now? Like a hammering in Liese's brain, this repetition went on, began again as a persistent roundabout. Imagining was Gothic castles and her own fairytales made up when she was in Fräulein Groenewold's kindergarten, and fantasies with favourite film stars later on. It became a silliness when reality was distorted. Of course he was right.

‘I can’t help thinking of her,’ Liese whispered none the less. ‘I cannot help it.’

Tony turned away, and slowly crossed to the window. He wanted to be outside, to walk about the streets, to have a chance to think. He had been asked to reason with Liese when she wanted her wedding to be in London. A longish letter had come from Schelesnau, pleading with him to intervene, to make her see sense. It was inconvenient for everyone; it was an added and unnecessary expense; it was *exzentrisch* of her.

Tonight Liese had learnt that Tony had been daring as a boy, that he had walked along a ledge from one dormitory window to another, eighteen feet above the ground. She had delighted in that – that he had not told her himself, that he was courageous and did not boast of it. Yet everything seemed different now.

‘It is a feeling,’ Liese said.

At the window, Tony stared down into the empty street. The artificial light had not yet been extinguished and would not be for hours. Yet dawn had already crept in, among the parked cars, the plastic sacks brought up from basements the night before, bicycles chained to railings. What did she mean, a feeling?

‘Honestly, there is no reason to be upset.’

As he spoke, Tony turned from the window. Liese’s face was tight and nervous now, for a moment not beautiful. The air that came into the room was refreshingly cold, and again he wanted to be walking in it, alone somewhere. She did not love him was what she meant, she had been taken from him. He said so, staring down into the street again, his back to her.

‘Oh no, I love you, Tony.’

All over London, sleeping now, were tomorrow’s wedding guests – her mother and her father, her friends come all the way from Schelesnau. Her sisters’ bridesmaids’ dresses were laid out. Flowers had been ordered, and a be-ribboned car. The grass of the hotel lawns was trimmed for the reception. In her house by the sea Tony’s aunt had ironed the clothes she’d chosen, and Liese imagined them waiting on their hangers. The morning flights would bring more guests from Germany. She had been stubborn about the city of their romance. There would have been no old woman’s sleep disturbed in Schelesnau, no ugly unintended incident. Why did she know that the dead were carried from a house in a plain long box, not a coffin?

‘We are different kinds of people, Tony.’

‘Because you are German and I am English? Is that it? That history means something after all?’

She shook her head. Why did he think that? Why did he go off so much in the wrong direction, seizing so readily a useful cliché?

‘We are not enemies, we are friends.’ She said a little more, trying to explain what did not seem to her to be complicated. Yet she felt she made it so, for the response was bewilderment.

‘Remember that office party?’ Tony said. ‘The quarrelling woman in red? The waitress smiling when we went off together? 00178. Remember that?’

She tried to, but the images would not come as clearly as they usually did. ‘Yes, I remember,’ she said.

The doubt in their exchanges brought hesitation, was an inflexion that could not be disguised. Silences came, chasms that each time were wider.

‘This has to do with us, not with the past we did not know.’ Liese shook her head, firm in her emphasis.

Tony nodded and, saying nothing, felt the weight of patience. He wondered about it in a silence that went on for minutes, before there was the far-off rattle of the human voice, faint and small. He looked from the window to where Liese had laid the receiver on the table. He watched her move to pick it up.

They stood together while a clergyman repeated familiar lines. A ring was passed from palm to palm. When the last words were spoken they turned to walk away together from the clergyman and the altar.

The wedding guests strolled on tidy hotel lawns. A photographer fussed beneath a bright blue sky. ‘You are more beautiful than I ever knew,’ Tony whispered while more champagne was drunk and there was talk in German and in English. ‘And I love you more.’

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Liese smiled in the moment they had purloined, before another speech was called for, before her father expressed his particular joy that the union of two families brought with it today the union of two nations. ‘We are two foolish people,’ Tony had said when at last the telephone receiver was replaced, after the journey to the loft had been retailed in detail, an apology offered because carrying out the instructions had taken so long. They had embraced, the warmth of their relief sensual as they clung to one another. And the shadow of truth that had come was lost in the euphoria.

‘I’m sorry,’ Liese said in the next day’s sunshine. ‘I’m sorry I was a nuisance.’

Glasses were raised to greater happiness than the happiness of the day. Together they smiled and waved from the car when it came to take them away. Then private at last, they let their tiredness show, each reaching for a hand. Their thoughts were different. He had been right. Yet again, for Tony, that conclusion repeated itself: not for an instant in the night had he doubted that he’d been right. Did love spawn victims? Liese wondered. Had they been warned off a territory of unease that did not yet seem so? Why was it that passing incidents seemed more significant in people’s lives and their relationships than the enmity or amity of nations? For a moment Liese wanted to speak of that, and almost did before deciding not to.