

## The Visit

After he'd notated in his pocket diary the dates and times of her arrival and departure in and out of Heathrow, Hirschel crumpled up Eva's letter and tossed it at the wall behind his desk. Then he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He hated this; hated the upside-down-ness of it all. And it was always the same. He was already beginning to feel the little pulses under his skin hammer away at him and his stomach curdle with nerves. Her visits affected him this way. He opened his eyes again. With a long, loud sigh, he let his focus wander around the bedroom; a new bedroom now that he and Fleur had renovated it, adding built-ins that covered two full walls and stretched from floor to ceiling. On the longer of the two walls was his desk. It was built between the cupboards and above it hung a caricature of Fleur. They'd been on their honeymoon in the South of France, he remembered, when she was cajoled into sitting for the street artist. He sighed again and made himself turn his attention back to his desk and Eva. Let's get this over and done with, he said aloud to himself and reached across the desk to grab the crumpled blue airmail letter. To make room on the pale green blotter, he moved aside the emptied contents of

his suit pockets: a small packet of layered white tissue paper precisely folded like an envelope to protect the brilliance of the cut stones he would sell at the Diamond Club tomorrow; loose coins; pound notes; scribbled memos on scraps of paper that had been tucked into his diary; and the new Mont Blanc ball point pen he was especially proud of. He pulled a sheet of imprinted white vellum from his drawer, picked up his Mont Blanc and began to compose his response to Eva.

*Dear Eva, he began. Thank you for your letter.*

He stopped, put down the pen and stared out of the window. From his bedroom, he could see his back garden and the back gardens of the houses on the street perpendicular to his. All the gardens were separated and surrounded by tall wooden fences. His garden was small, much smaller than those perpendicular to his, and plain. He hadn't done much new to the outside of his house, just hired Eddie, a retired copper-turned-handyman, to maintain it. The house was pretty much the way it was when he'd bought it eight years before; roses still climbing on bamboo sticks up the side of the red-brick, detached garage, a lilac tree at the back of the garden and a large rhododendron bush growing right outside the dining room window which blossomed in vivid pink. Then there were daffodils in the spring and pansies of all colors and patterns in the summer. It was enough, he'd decided. English summers didn't warrant more of an investment.

He picked up his pen again and looked at the few words he'd just written on the white sheet of letter paper in front of him. There really wasn't much for him to say. God! How he hated her visits. She brought presents, always overdoing it. Eva was the heroine, the star in their daughter's life, he the unforgiven monster. Never mind that all the responsibility of bringing her up was his now: in sickness and in sorrow. Ach! What was the use? He put his mind back to the letter.

*I have not mentioned your visit to Mali yet. I don't want her over-excited. I hope you understand and comply with my wishes. Best regards...* Or was that too formal and business-like? Perhaps *fondly* would be better. In either case, he didn't really offer his best regards or feel fondly towards her. He signed off with just *Best*.

He copied her address onto an envelope, folded his letter into thirds, placed it into the envelope and sealed it shut. Done. He could forget about all of this for the time being.

\*\*\*

Perched on a stool at the kitchen counter, Mali was eating her breakfast of buttered toast and milky coffee and listening, as she did every day, for the slam of the letterbox and the faint flutter of envelopes dropping to the beige carpeted floor. She was always on the lookout for the one made of blue paper, so thin and light, it was like the air it traveled through to cross the Atlantic from New York where her mother lived, to her in London. Today she wasn't expecting a letter. So, she was surprised when, scooping up the usual assortment of brown-enveloped bills from the floor to stack them on the glass shelf below the mirror, she noticed the familiar blue one in the pile. There it was, her mother's familiar rounded script marked squarely on the pre-printed address form of the airmail letter. But it wasn't Mali's name on the line above the address, it was her father's. She shuffled the envelopes around and stood them on the shelf, the blue one barely visible between two larger ones. The letter could have only meant one thing. Her mother was coming to visit her. She skipped back to the kitchen, swallowed the remains of her breakfast standing up, shouted goodbye to no one in particular, picked up her satchel and headed out through the back door to school.

After dinner that evening, she sat on the couch, her eyes glued to the TV, but hardly able to take anything in.

Bedtime, her father announced with a clap of his hands as *Emergency Ward 10*, her favorite TV program, came to an end. Don't dilly-dally, he added. It's a school night.

She got up slowly, went to him, bent down and kissed his cheek. It was rough with stubble.

Goodnight, she said, hovering over him as she was trying to think of a reason to delay going up to bed. Maybe he had forgotten about the letter. If she lingered a little longer perhaps her lingering would jog his memory.

Bedtime, he said for the second time. Come on, Mali, why is this always so difficult? He uncrossed his legs.

If she asked him about her mother's letter, he'd accuse her of sneaking around behind his back.

I need five shillings, she said. We have an outing to Hatfield House on Friday.

Again? He stretched out his right leg and reached into his pocket. But all he had was a sixpence, two thrupenny bits and a couple of pennies. I think you have more outings than you have school, he said and he laughed. See if I have more change upstairs on my desk.

Thank you, she said and reached over and kissed his stubbly cheek again.

She pretended she was a tightrope walker and, putting one foot directly in front of the other as slowly as she possibly could without losing her balance, she went to kiss Fleur goodnight as well. She left the lounge, closing the door behind her and waited there for a moment. Perhaps he'd remember he had something to tell her and call her back in. But the only sound she heard was coming from the TV. She climbed the stairs.

She went through the motions of getting ready for bed. She shivered in the toilet, a small narrow, echoing room with a little window high up on the back wall that was always open, no

matter the weather. Next, in the pink bathroom, she washed her hands and face and brushed her teeth. On the way back to her room, she passed the open door to her father's bedroom. She went in to look for the five shillings she needed for her school outing. She picked up two half-crowns and was about to leave when she noticed the blue airmail letter balled up in the wastepaper basket. She took it out.

*Dear Hirschel, she read. I hope this letter finds you well. After searching and almost giving up, I finally found a reasonably priced roundtrip flight to London. I will be arriving early on the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> and leaving again the following Thursday evening. Best wishes to Fleur. Eva.*

Mali had guessed right. She balled up the letter again, threw it back into the wastepaper basket and tiptoed out of the room. Why wasn't he telling her she was coming? Maybe he'd tell her tomorrow.

He didn't say anything to her the following day either. Nor the days that followed. When, without a word, he sent her off to bed on the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup>, she felt sure that she'd either imagined the letter or that something had changed her mother's mind. Perhaps, she thought, something had happened to her.

\*\*\*

The day Eva was due to arrive, Hirschel woke up before his alarm went off. A strange lethargy had overcome him as soon as he'd opened his eyes. He couldn't rouse himself out of bed. He bunched up his pillow, put it behind his neck—in that crook between head and shoulders—and lay there staring up at the ceiling, watching the gray early morning light spread across his bedroom. He turned towards the window and noticed another new hairline crack in the paint where the ceiling met the window. Damn it! Why can't the house just stay put? *It's*

*like wrinkles, guvnor*, his handyman, Eddie, had once said to him when he complained about the ever-shifting walls in his house. *It gives the place character*. Some character, he'd thought, and smiled now in the semi-light. He shut his eyes. He would try to fall back to sleep. Instead of sleep, though, his thoughts snaked back. Always to the same spot. And like the needle on a scratched record, it played over and over the same few cuts again and again.

\*\*\*

Hirschel had nearly missed his stop and needed to push his way through the crowd of standing passengers to get off the bus. He could see his house just up the road. The red bricks, the steeply pitched roof, the large bay windows curtained in sheers. Then there were the red square tiles that led from the drive to the front door. Eva had wanted to replace them with flagstone, he hadn't cared one way or the other. But he'd always loved his front door; the wrought iron curlicue grillwork protecting the frosted, lumpy glass, like armor on a knight's chest.

Mali came running into the kitchen as he came in. He put down his newspaper, kissed the top of her head, then turned from her and began to climb the stairs to his bedroom, his heart's pulse, a deafening chug-chugging in his ears.

The bedroom door was closed. He turned the knob and walked into the room, shutting the door behind him. Eva looked up from her book for just long enough to say hello. He didn't respond. He went to his cupboard, took off his suit, hung it up, took out his at-home trousers and put those on. She was still engrossed in the Agatha Christie mystery she had picked up at the library's jumble sale last weekend. How could she be reading at a time like this? he wondered.

Let's eat, Eva said, folding down the corner of the page to mark her place. And as though it were an ordinary Friday, they walked out of their bedroom together. Downstairs, Eva disappeared into the kitchen.

Hirschel, she yelled out, one matzo ball or two?

One, he shouted back and wondered if he was going mad. One or two? What possible difference could that make to a woman who has gone to bed with another man?

In between the soup and the main course, Hirschel got up to turn on the TV. He stood in front of it and watched snippets of the news. Israel was becoming aggressive. Not that he could blame her. Passivity had brought nothing to the Jews in all of history. It was time to stop the scapegoating and fight back. Yes, he thought, we have all had enough.

What's happening in the news, Eva said, as she might have any other evening.

The same old nonsense, he said. Still the Arabs want to annihilate the Israelis, wipe them off the face of the earth and make believe they never existed. Now Israel is getting clever. No longer will she sit back and wait to be attacked. No.

Hirschel could feel his face flush hot. His voice sounded strange to him, louder than usual, taut; as though belonging to another man, bigger and stronger.

He pointed to the lit Shabbat candles. They think they can snuff us out just like that, he said, banging his fist on the table.

The flames wavered in unison, the only response to his outburst.

Israel must survive, he went on, the urge to be heard becoming stronger.

Hirschel, Eva said, Israel was the aggressor, remember? I'm sure they knew what they were doing. They invaded Egypt. What did the Israelis expect? That Egypt would sit back and allow them to run them over?

You don't know what the hell you're talking about, he said, waving his hand in dismissal.

Then don't talk politics to me, she said between clenched teeth. I've lived enough to last me the rest of my life. No more.

No more. Those shrill words made him dizzy. It was as if in those two small words he heard his life coming to a screeching halt. No more.

After dinner, he went back to his study and the TV. He scanned the paper, then checked the television listings to see what there was to watch. A Western or Detective show would be perfect; anything to deaden his mind. But there was only the news program on now. So, he sat back in his armchair, put his feet up on the hassock, and watched as the threat of a full-scale Mid-East war—projected in black and white flashes across the small screen of his television set—was coming to a raging head.

\*\*\*

He felt Fleur get out of bed. He opened his eyes. He must've fallen back to sleep after all. The bedroom had become quite bright. He sat up. He had to go and wake up Mali now, tell her about her mother arriving today. It's only a week, he repeated to himself over and over, as he planted his feet on the floor. Just one week and Eva would be gone again. He hated the upheaval. He hated the tears afterwards, the consoling he was so lousy at. Oh well, he thought, and he put on his dressing gown and slid his feet into his slippers.

\*\*\*

There was a quick, loud knock on Mali's bedroom door. She woke with a start. Her father came into her room. He was still in his pajamas and dressing gown. His hair was sticking up at the back of his head where he'd slept on it badly. He stood at the foot of her bed.



Hurry up, he said. Get dressed. Your mother is coming today. She will pick you up from school this afternoon.

He then turned on his heels and left her room, his opened silk dressing gown billowing out and flapping noiselessly behind him.

The letter was real after all. She had begun to think of it as a blue figment of her imagination. Or that she'd gone crazy with wishing so hard, the longing for her mother had materialized into a thing of flesh and blood; as if she were a magician performing miracles with smoke and mirrors. Why had he waited until now to tell her?

She got out of bed. She chose her favorite white blouse to wear with her school uniform. She took extra care with her short brown hair, wetting her unruly bangs and brushing them flat to her forehead.

She always wanted to look perfect for her mother.