

DECEMBER 6 1977

I was there at the beginning. Mother of Noel and Alexandra, wife of Leon. I was there in London last year in December with a grey Christmas on my mind, spending money and waiting, spending time with myself. The window-sills of the flat, I noticed, seemed to be rotting away. The weight of all the wet London mornings was slowly rotting them to nothing and I said to Leon, 'Have you noticed this rot everywhere creeping right to our windows?' I said, 'Have you noticed the ironwork on the balcony, so sore with its blisters of rust that one can't bear to touch it?' This was when it began, Sister. I shall try to say it all to you, Sister Benedicta, whom I imagine still in the hot courtyard of the Convent School in India, tiny nun in grey when I was a fat girl.

I've begun going to church again. I walk to the Brompton Oratory and in all its vastness whisper a little puff of prayer for Leon who lies in the hospital with tubes up his nose and a bag out of his stomach and who can't make a sound any more but has to write down the few things that cross his mind on a little slate. 'The night nurse masturbates' he wrote the first time he wrote anything down and a few days later, the second time he reached for the slate, he tried to write this again but his hand was very feeble that day and all he could write was 'the night nurse m'. But I take hope, Sister, from this and from the other little things he's written since writing that and have got into the habit of asking God to spare him. If you were here, Sister Benedicta, I would ask you to ask God

Letter to Sister Benedicta

to spare him even though he's a Jew and thinks that nuns are the carrion of the world. We could kneel down side by side in the bathroom – I've never prayed anywhere but the bathroom since I married Leon – and say something out loud to God and to the repeating kingfishers on the wallpaper. You would pray with your white hands folded under your breasts and I would pray in the manner of someone learning to pray, doing a kind of prayer exercise with my fists pushed into my eyes. We could ask God to give Leon back.

I was quite wrong to imply that Leon has written several things on his slate. He's only written three things altogether since he became conscious. He wrote 'the night nurse masturbates', then on the day his hand seemed very weak like an old man's hand he wrote 'the night nurse m' and after that he wrote nothing for three days until one morning when I went to visit him and he suddenly picked up the slate and wrote 'the aforementioned Richard Mayhew Wainwright' and I honestly couldn't tell you what this means or whether it's a good sign or a bad. Sometimes it seems to me that if he can write long words like 'aforementioned' and 'masturbate' and spell them correctly he must be getting better, but who can say? Not the doctors. They don't utter a sentence in the way of comfort or hope. They are extremely gentle with me, the doctors, never rude or cross, but I long for them to utter and they don't. They say, 'It's really too early to tell, Mrs Constad. You must be patient.'

I remember the way it rained in India, Sister. You, the nuns, would turn on all the lights in the classrooms and in the corridors and though you often said you couldn't bear the terrible heat of India you went mute with the rains, thinking of Noah and great floods and disasters in your silence. The day the Viceroy visited the Convent School the rains broke and we heard their drumming in the middle of our 'welcome' pageant and wondered about the Viceroy's plumes and the Viceroy's wife in her finery as we made the word 'welcome' in girls across the dais. I was one half of the 'o' in 'welcome', arching forward, feet and fingertips pressed to another girl

who was the other half of the 'o' and I could smell her menstrual blood as we arched and stretched for the Viceroy and I thought, Lord I hope she doesn't bleed onto the dais in front of the Viceroy's wife who looks so fine and beautiful in her silk dress that you couldn't imagine blood ever flowing out of her.

Leon is quite bloodless in the private room, no wound anywhere, nothing to see except the changes in him that are so hard to describe. When I look at him, I imagine the smallness of his heart with its branching arteries and veins compared to the whole size of him and then I marvel that it still keeps him going. I talk to him; I jabber away. I don't tell him that I go to the Oratory and pay 10p for a candle to stop his spirit flickering out; I don't say, I'm imagining your heart, Leon, so small inside the rest of you and can't believe that it will ever let you run, dear, even talk, because your face under the tubes seems so absolutely blank and only the right side of you moves under your blankets, but I talk about the weather and the difficulty of getting taxis and the price of flowers and about the men who have come to repaint the window-sills so that they'll stop rotting away in the damp and fumes and 'when you come home, Leon,' I say, 'you'll find all the window-sills done and as good as new.' I never talk to him about Alexandra and Noel. I think he wants to forget about them and I must not interrupt this forgetting in case it helps to make him well. But quite often I want to shout out: 'I was there at the beginning of it all, Leon. I saw it happen and there is no need to lie down and die because of it. Look at me, fat still, fifty-year-old woman with a crocodile handbag who last week had a cry in the powder room at Harrods, but not *dying*, Leon, not dying, Sister Benedicta, silent nun dead or alive wherever you are . . .'

Fat, curly-haired girl, Ruby Waterhouse, with my red cheeks and big thighs like my father's so that his uniform always looked stretched and my mother often laughed: 'Don't split your breeches, Harry, on parade!' I haven't often given her a thought, so preoccupied, you see, with the comings and

Letter to Sister Benedicta

goings of my family for twenty-six years, trying to care for Leon, proud of the way he's kept his body in trim, there really hasn't been time to remember the Convent School and the funny ways of the English in India, trying so hard to make everything just like Wiltshire with picnics and tennis parties. But I do remember her now and then, just as now and then I've taken to walking to the Oratory and doing my poor prayer and coming out again wondering, could that have done any good? And if I see myself reflected in Harrods' windows (sometimes I walk straight by the windows, not looking at the display, afraid for some reason to see a reflection) I think, Ruby Constad that's all you've got, only the self that was once Ruby Waterhouse, daughter of a Colonel with my big thighs and my bad deportment and then I feel my thighs rubbing together as I walk and the touch of my own warm skin is comforting: I can go on.

It rained the day that Noel didn't come home. We thought he'd be catching the 10.30 from Cambridge and Leon said 'boil a chicken for lunch' and I said 'boilers are very hard to find these days, Leon.' But I walked to the butchers in my green mac and got a boiler and on the way home bought some dyed teasels from a drenched barrow boy who said 'Happy Christmas, lady' and I thought, oh Lord, only ten days and we'll be eating plum pudding. My stomach felt uncomfortable from all the eating we'd done the evening before at Betty Hazlehurst's dinner party, eating and eating and getting hot in my mauve cocktail dress but trying to listen to Gerald Tibbs, the man on my left, pale man with little shivering hands who couldn't eat a thing, he said, since his wife had left him, left him and gone off with a smart-alec Romeo, left him alone in the house with all her things, even her furs and gilt-framed pictures of the children. 'She'll come back,' I said to the pale man, Gerald, idiotic thing to say when of course she won't.

She's gone to Milan
with her smart young man
leaving her furs

December 6 1977

and all that was hers
including the very
pale man she called Gerry.

'I'm so sorry,' I said, 'I didn't mean to say "she'll come back". What a stupid thing to say when of course she may not. The thing is, these kind of social occasions seem to take away . . .'

'What?' said Gerald Tibbs.

'Compassion,' I said.

So the next day, as it rained on London and I noticed the window-sills for the first time, Leon came home for lunch to welcome Noel and Noel never arrived. We waited in the drawing-room, Leon staring out beyond the rotting balcony to the street. I mixed us each a martini and laid the table, made a sauce for the chicken and sat down, remembering the kind of noise Noel always made in our flat, wondering why, when he'd been a quiet little boy, he was now so full of shouting and loud laughter. Leon kept looking at his watch. 'Do sit down, Leon,' I said, but he went on pacing by the window. 'Half past one,' he said.

At two o'clock we ate a little bit of chicken, but after a few mouthfuls, Leon decided that he felt very tired and went to telephone his office to say he wouldn't be coming back. After he'd telephoned, he flopped down on the sofa in the drawing-room where he fell asleep and his piece of chicken in its sauce went cold and I unwrapped the dyed teasels from their sodden newspaper and stuck them in Grandma Constad's Chinese vase where they stood erect and dead. I crept into the drawing-room with the vase of teasels where Leon sat asleep. I put the vase down without a sound.

It is mortally silent in Leon's room at the nursing home. Most of the time he seems to be in a kind of sleep and isn't aware of me. His clients have sent expensive flowers and his room is a bower. I notice the armchair where the night nurse sits with her hand up her skirt. I wonder if the night nurse is young. I wonder if in the depths of his inert being Leon feels