

Painting the Spare Room

By

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A Play for Radio

CHARACTERS

MAN (mid 30s) geography teacher

WOMAN (mid 30s) NHS registrar

BARMAN

Set in the present, during a horse-riding weekend on Exmoor.

MAN:

(NARRATING)

So many blues.

That's what he remembered.

Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky

That quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the
moor,

Nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as
they bathed in the valley stream,

Washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume
of horse from their bodies.

No, it was the deep azure of her costume and the silvery
cobalt shadows in her hair.

It was the dark cherry blue of the bruise on her thigh where
she had cantered under an unseen bough.

And the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of
steely blue determination -

These prizes he held fast in his memory.

These, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen,

Flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they
swooped and dipped over the water.
A thrilling, ephemeral moment of companionship.

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB

FADE UP

INT: MID EVENING MEAL
SERVICE IS IN FULL SWING

MAN: A large dry white wine and a pint of Exmoor Ale please. And
can I order some food too? Haven't eaten since breakfast –
could eat a horse. Figuratively of course.

BARMAN: Certainly sir, what would you like?

MAN: I'm going to have a steak pie and chips. (TO WOMAN) Do
you want the same?

WOMAN: Yes. Why break the habit? I think I've had steak pie every
time we've come here in the last five years.

MAN: (TO BARMAN). Here, can you put it on this card?

WOMAN: That's why I like this weekend. It's always the same: Early morning, fetch the horses in from the field, groom, tack, then ride until we're knackered. Brush the horses, feed and water, then rug them and turn them out in their field. No unexpected excitements, no emails, no interruptions. Comfortable predictability.

MAN: Yes, a good cowboy looks after the horses first.

WOMAN: Then swim in the river, and brush and rug ourselves up and then the pub. We are just creatures of habit.

MAN: (TO BARMAN) We'll be at the table in the corner by the fire.

BARMAN: Yes, thank you sir, we'll bring the food over in a few moments.

MAN (TO WOMAN). Here, you take the coats – I'll bring the drinks.

WOMAN: (V/O) (NARRATING)

Like all couples they had built up a database of preferences and foibles, knowledge hard won over the years of the relationship. At first there had been secrets and surprises, revelations to be deliciously discovered, and then as time went on, a stability, a reference book of behaviour, comfortably repeated in each other's presence. Now, they were simply riding companions, their initial passion and intimacy not forgotten, but conveniently shelved.

THE COUPLE MOVE TO AND SIT
DOWN AT THEIR TABLE. AS
THEY DO SO THE MAN LEANS
ACROSS AND KISSES THE
WOMAN.

WOMAN: What was that for?

MAN: Was that a bad thing to do?

WOMAN: Just unexpected. Maybe even surprising.

MAN: Maybe I should surprise you more.

WOMAN: Maybe you should.

MAN: It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.

WOMAN: What?

MAN: I don't know – when we were swimming in the river - it
seemed such an achingly, wonderfully blue.

WOMAN: Well, it's a good job I don't wear my cossie back in London,
then. Might cause a bit of problem wearing it in Camden
High Street if it has that effect.

MAN: Yes.

PAUSE

MAN: Remember when we down by Tarr Steps this afternoon. We
were following the bridlepath where the woods come down to
the river.

WOMAN: Yes.

MAN: You were leading –

WOMAN: As I usually do!

MAN: I was following. I was admiring the curve of your shoulder, the gentle sway of your body as it moved in harmony with the horse.

WOMAN: And so?

MAN: It made me think back to the first time we rode those paths. I felt the same as I did then. I wanted you. Or rather I wanted to be there. It just seemed the natural thing to do. Like the kiss just now.

WOMAN: (NARRATING) They were both new to university then, more than a decade ago – she a medic, he hedging his bets with an easy geography degree and a notion to become a teacher. They had come in a group of a dozen largely insolvent

students, loftily calling themselves the University Riding Club's Official Easter tour, underwriting the cost from the University's Social Club's coffers with some traditionally dubious student accounting. They had to borrow tents from the University Officer Training Corps and had a special rate from the local stables as one of the group was going out with the farmer's daughter.

MAN: Do you remember that first weekend?

WOMAN: Yes. I forgot my airbed – I remember how hard the ground was and my sleeping bag was in a state. I often wondered why it took you so long to ask me out that weekend too. I could see you wanted to.

MAN: Well, you could have asked me instead.

WOMAN: No, I liked watching you trying to make up your mind. You never were very impulsive. I was glad you did eventually though.

MAN: (NARRATING). The weekend had been quite a success until the moment he had thought to encourage one of the farmer's geese into the girls' tent.

SCENE 2: FLASHBACK: THE CAMPSITE, IN THE FARMER'S FIELD.

EXT: EVENING. FRANTIC
HONKING, HISSING AND
BARKING FROM THE GOOSE

WOMAN: (V/O) Where did that bloody goose come from? That bastard has shit all over my sleeping bag!

FADE DOWN GOOSE NOISES

MAN: (V/O) (NARRATING)
He was careful to keep a low profile for a day or so. It was only on the last afternoon that he managed to ask her if she would like to go for a drink when they got back to college. He was surprised when she said yes. But then, he told himself, the goose was hardly likely to grass him up.

FADE DOWN

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB (CONTINUED)

FADE UP: INT

WOMAN: I'm still not sure you should just go around kissing people out of the blue.

MAN: Shouldn't I have? I was just trying to remind you. Didn't it remind you?

MAN: Maybe. It was unsettling - I thought we were just friends now...kissing was something from the past and I'm not sure you can ever go back to your past. The clock never stops ticking, we can't be students again.

MAN: Do you really believe that? I think we can make whatever choices we like. And I wanted to kiss you because, when we swam this evening and I saw you in that costume it was like

the clock had been wound back up and was ready to run again.

WOMAN: (UNSURE). Hmm, maybe ... Do you want to see what's happened to the food? And maybe another round? Here, take it out of this.

SCRAPING OF CHAIR AS HE
GETS UP

WOMAN: (NARRATING). She wished he had not mentioned clocks. Maybe, she thought, you can wind the clock spring back up, but you can never move the hands backwards. She was thinking of her biological clock not her wristwatch. How things change. Not this pub, though. It's the same it has always been. Fifteen years since we first came here. We've changed though. She remembered that student flat – well more of a large bedsit then. And those evenings of 'pasta and passion', drinking cheap Italian wine in the Mille Pine, walking home through Regents Park, listening for the

penguins in the zoo, though they never heard them, then a warm bed. Four years turned into a companionable, efficient partnership – studying together, sharing a chicken casserole, increasingly sober as final exams approach. They didn't really change; they just sort of calmed down. Until that final dinner. He would be teaching in some London suburb. She had a six month WHO placement in Tanzania. It had been convenient, but it was time to move on. An evening dinner, a tidy endpoint.

FADE DOWN

FLASHBACK: INT: MILLE PINE RESTAURANT

FADE UP

MAN: Here, I've got something for you. I'd really like you to take it on your trip. It's sort of appropriate for an African adventure.

WOMAN: Thank you – how cute – where on earth did you find wrapping paper with such tiny elephants on it?

UNWRAPPING PARCEL

WOMAN: Oh, wow! A compass.

MAN: Just keep going south – if you start seeing penguins then you've gone too far.

WOMAN: That is such a nice thing, so thoughtful, and, well, so really nice.

MAN: Here, let me see. I can't believe it. Look, the wretched thing is broken! North is that way, but the needle is pointing the other way.

WOMAN: I don't understand.

MAN: They've screwed it up - painted the wrong end of the needle red!

WOMAN: You know you don't really need to give me a present at all. It was a really kind thought though. I expect I'll be tied up in

the hospital in Dodoma though. Probably not much time for safaris.

MAN: Well, actually, I did have another choice for a present – but I was not ... not quite sure what you would you think of it.

WOMAN: Wow, that was good contingency planning then. And more elephant paper!

UNWRAPS SECOND PARCEL

WOMAN: What is it this time. A Swiss Army knife perhaps? Or a portable mosquito net – that would be useful. (PAUSE). (MORTIFIED) – Oh, it's a ring!

FADE DOWN

FADE UP

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB (CONTINUED)

MAN: Do you want those last few chips?

WOMAN: Yeah, go on then.

PAUSE

WOMAN: So, do you think we should go back?

MAN: No, I don't actually want to go back, even if we could.
Would you? If I'm honest, it was all a bit puzzling then. I don't think, looking back I ever quite knew what was happening, I mean, how serious was it? What did you want? Indeed, what did I want? You were right when you said that was then, and this is now. Why can't we just start from here, in this moment, and simply go forward from now.

MAN: But I don't want to stop being friends. I want to be friends and something more than that. Look, why don't you move in again?

WOMAN: What? Well, that came out of the blue!

PAUSE

WOMAN: Why did we stop having sex, do you think?

MAN: Well, you didn't have that blue swimsuit then.

WOMAN: No, be serious. I didn't really think about it at the time. But it's been on my mind recently. It was more you than me that stopped it. I think it just gradually faded away. And then when you're sharing the same flat and you're not having sex, then you're no different from any other couple of people that are friends. At that point, you might as well not be in the same bed. Or even in the same flat. And then once you are only friends, then one friend moves out. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your life, they become just like the hundreds of other people in your life.

MAN: You know it wasn't really just me that stopped the sex. Not really. I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. You were too as I recall.

WOMAN: Yes, I do remember that. But it wasn't really the physical stuff that I started worrying about – it was when you gave me flowers and I didn't like the showiness of it, or when we held hands in the street, or when you gave me that running horse necklace. I don't think I wanted that sort of relationship then.

MAN: I never quite knew how to show – well, you know.... Then you got registrar and I was still stuck trying to educate the uncouth of Peckham – I felt it was all a bit pointless. You were off saving lives – I was trying to tell some spotty youths that Texas was in America and not a band. And now you go to work in Prada, I go in jeans. I just felt I couldn't keep up.

PAUSE

MAN: I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming

WOMAN: Yes, I saw them too.

MAN: They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just downstream of the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two

little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their life depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?

MAN: I don't think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can't see any, then they fly to another perch and look again. Fish, nest, raise their young. They just are – well, what they are – happy, responding just in the moment. I envied them.

WOMAN: Wouldn't it be great to be just like them.

MAN: Why not? Can I kiss you again?

WOMAN: All right.

THEY KISS

MAN: You know, I've never told you, but that was me with the
goose in the tent.

WOMAN: I know.

FADE DOWN

SCENE 3: THE FARMER'S FIELD

EXT: EARLY MORNING

MAN RATTLES HORSE NUTS IN
BUCKET

MAN: (CALLING HORSES) Coo wee! Coo wee!

MORE HORSE NUTS RATTLING.

Come on then. Nuts for breakfast!

HORSES APPROACH

MAN: Here, you take the rugs. I'll make a start on brushing the mud
off them.

MAN AND WOMAN V/O
CONTINUES OVER SOUNDS OF
BRUSHING AND EXERTION

- WOMAN: Okay, pass me that curry comb then.
- MAN: How do you think they ended being called Bonny and Clyde?
Seems a bit of an exotic choice for a Dartmoor pony and a
Welsh cob.
- WOMAN: Well, I can't see them robbing a bank – Clyde would make a
rather pedestrian get-away vehicle, and Bonny would be
waiting at the end of each gallop for him anyway, just like she
did yesterday.
- MAN: Yes, they don't look like they should make a working pair,
but somehow they seem to make a companionable couple. I'd
would have called them Chalk and Cheese myself.
- WOMAN: Right, all done. I'll leave you to pick out the hooves and go
back and get on with some bacon and eggs. Do you want
two rashers or three?

PAUSE

MAN: I think I'll paint the spare room blue then, when we get back.

WOMAN: Or maybe pink...

PAUSE

MAN (NARRATING)

So many years later, the viridian and emerald greens,

The burnt umbers and siennas have all now faded into distant

grey –

But still the blues remain.

END

Running Time: 14 mins 55 sec

