

The Beautiful Indifference

by Sarah Hall

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Her lover had missed the train from London and would be arriving late. This was not uncommon after a night shift at the hospital. In the hotel room she studied herself in the mirror. The mirror was oval and full-length, in a hinged frame, which could be tilted up or down. She had bought a new dress. The blue was good on her, lighting her face and complementing her eyes. It was fitted through the bodice and waist but slipped to the floor easily when unzipped. He would like it. She finished making up her face, applying a layer of lip gloss, tidying the red spill at the corner of her mouth. Lipstick never lasted long when they were together; he would always kiss her just after she had applied it, as if he liked the smearing, viscous sensation. Sometimes she felt sure it was discomposing her that he enjoyed. She had lost a little weight since their last meeting. This was not deliberate. She'd been travelling a lot and had missed a few meals. The contours of her thighs and shoulders were pleasing. The previous night, after the reading, she had taken codeine and had slept well.

The room was hot but the window had jammed after opening only a few inches. Was this really designed to stop suicides, she wondered. Surely no one chose to jump from the second floor of a hotel. Better to use the bed, the bathtub. A soft pillowy ending or a wet red one. Outside, voices were loud in the street. The races had finished and people, made giddy by the early summer heat and grandstand cocktails, were shunting food containers into bins, shouting to each other about which venue to go to next. There was the sound of glass smashing, followed by juvenile laughter. Nearby a car alarm began howling. The tight northern gentility the city claimed for itself was coming unlaced.

She stepped away from the mirror and looked into the street. Light plumed over the buildings, a diffuse lilac glow like that which she had seen above the immense stonework of Paris on her first visit, coming up out of the Métro into its exquisite sordid heart. Perhaps they should go to Paris, soon. Or Florence. A last tourist carriage rattled on its way to the Minster, drawn by a white shire, the horse with its great, feathered hooves strutting on the cobbles. The driver leaned out from his position on the cab, talking into his mobile phone, shaking his head. A group of South Americans took photographs from the leather galley behind him.

The plan had been to meet and have a late lunch and then walk along the citadel walls. Now he would be coming here, to the hotel, and they would go out to dinner somewhere. It meant less time together, by a few hours. He would be catching the evening train back to London the following day. But perhaps it was better this way. Better to meet in the privacy of their room, so that they could be together for an hour, and empty themselves. A couple of times in the past the anticipation had led to problems; awkward exchanges, inappropriate behaviour. It had taken a few months to realise this initial discord did not mean incompatibility. She still found it remarkable: the spurs of desire, and the way desire interfered with all else. They were perfectly capable of having conversations, about politics, their occupations, anything. But they were not capable of corralling the animal necessity of ruining each other first.

She had recently mentioned this to a friend, not as a boast, more an observation, citing an encounter in a restaurant toilet, being discovered, and asked to leave.

Isn't it a bit ridiculous, the friend had replied, tending to her young child, spooning paste from its chin. You aren't a teenager. And actually, neither is he. Stop spitting out! What's wrong with you? You liked this yesterday!

Do you think it's unhealthy?

I didn't say that. Relationships are all defined differently, aren't they? If that's your thing. Anyway. Isn't it what you want, at the moment? Being with him means you can defer all the rest.

This had startled her. The tone. The implication that she was failing to make a sacrifice. Or that she had made a conscious choice.

What do you mean?

With exasperation the friend had turned away from the recalcitrant child, clattering the pot of orange paste and the plastic spoon down on the counter.

Oh, you know. Keep avoiding the hard stuff. Like this. The trouble is you probably don't have long left. Do you? And you act like it's not an issue. But everyone can see it is an issue.

She had noticed a change in the way her female friends responded to the relationship lately. At first they'd been enthusiastic, congratulatory, as if she were doing something avant-garde. She looked wonderful, they told her. She looked radiant. She should just enjoy it. But as the relationship had taken hold, becoming less casual, notes of disapproval had entered the discussion. Was it jealousy? Conservatism? She did not know. Perhaps she did seem ri-

diculous to them, now that it no longer constituted a fling, a desirability-affirming enterprise. Perhaps she was not entitled to the sex after all. Or the radiance. Men, on the other hand, had been unnerved from the beginning, as if she was not keeping to the natural order of things, as if she was performing an inversion. Or they had commented how lucky her lover was, recalling fondly an affair they themselves had had with an older woman during their youth. How they'd been taught a thing or two. After talking to them she was left with the dual feeling of being both transgressor and specialist. Only her father had been unreservedly for the relationship.

Darling, he had said to her, you should just let yourself feel something. If he makes you happy, be happy.

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She stepped back from the window and looked at herself in the mirror again. The neckline of the dress was quite high. It gave the impression of thickening her collarbones. In the wardrobe hung another dress, belted and with an Edwardian-style bathing stripe, which he had seen before and liked very much. It was more fun, less chic. She reached behind and

unfastened the one she was wearing. It drifted over her hips to the floor. She gathered it up and held it at waist height, paralysed for a moment by indecision, by aesthetics. Then she stepped back into it.

She sat on the bed. The book she was reading, or rather the book she had been carrying around for two weeks but not managing to read, was on the side table. She opened it and tried to get through a paragraph or two, but the words floated, the conceptual environment failed. She knew the author reasonably well; they had once shared the same publisher. Usually this motivated her to finish a novel – if only for the sake of etiquette. Often she discarded books. Whenever she made this confession people were astonished. It had come up again at her event last night. A woman on the front row had been appalled during the closing session.

How do we get our children to read more? All they do is play violent video games!

Why should they read? I don't. Given the choice I'd much rather do something else. Including blow things up.

You're joking? You can't really be serious?

Can't I? Why not?

Silence. Murmurs in the crowd. She was not adopting the correct role of advocate.

In truth, she disliked books. She felt a peculiar disquiet when opening the pages. She had felt it since childhood. She did not know why. Something in the act itself, the immersion, the seclusion, was disturbing. Reading was an affirmation of being alone, of being separate, trapped. Books were like *oubliettes*. Her preference was for company, the tactile world, atoms.

She shut the book. The cover was photographic, part of a female figure, a headless torso and limbs, though the novel itself was about the Second World War. The image was stock, meaningless. Give me a man, she thought. Give me the long cleft in his back. She had a popular science magazine in her bag too, which she had begun to buy in the last few months. But she had already finished the most appealing article about new-generation prosthetics. Soldiers coming home maimed were going to benefit hugely from new bioengineering techniques, according to the piece. The devices were becoming lighter, more flexible, intuitive of the brain's synaptic messages. It was as close to restoration as possible.

It was five thirty. The last she'd heard he had made it to King's Cross but he'd not texted since then to say which train he would be on. They arrived from London at twenty past the hour. The hotel was a ten-

minute walk from the station; he had the address and the room number. Either he would be here soon, within a few minutes, or he would be another hour. She'd been primed the whole afternoon and now she felt fraught. She was unsure about the blue dress with its high neckline. She was unsure how it would affect the sex. Her mind felt white, empty of intellectual conversation. She could recall none of the finer points of the article in the magazine, though the subject, the idea of psychology and kinetics, had seemed fascinating. The noise outside was intensifying. Heels striking the pavement. Gales of singing. The thump of music from a pub.

She stood from the bed and looked at herself in the mirror. Her skin was luminous and secretive. She stared. After a minute or so her appearance became unstructured, a collection of shapes and colours. There had been no plan, not for any of this. Perhaps she had planned nothing in her life. And yet here she was, in this room, in this form. Speculatively, side by side in a crowd, she and her lover could be the same age. They had enough in common, and there was enough difference to make the relationship interesting. In practice there was no problem. But perhaps there was a flaw to the whole thing she hadn't seen, or was refusing to see, or which had not

yet manifested. Children? Her friends now assumed what her position was.

She put her fingertips to her groin and felt along the ligaments and the gristle at the top of her thighs. The nodes were like unopened buds. She reached behind and unzipped the dress and it slid over her hips to the floor. She felt again, without the fabric barrier. Her body was full of unknowable cartilage, knuckled and furled material. Sometimes, when they lay together, his hands would unconsciously map her contours, pressing the organs and tissues. Or he would find her pulse in alternative places – the vees between her finger bones, the main arteries. He did not seem to realise he was doing this.

She was refastening the dress when the door lock clucked and released and he came into the room.

Hi.

Oh, hi.

He dropped his battered shoulder bag on the floor and came to her and kissed her.

Sorry I'm late.

Don't worry. I've had a good afternoon.

This is a nice hotel.

He greeted her again, softly, then stepped back. He removed his jacket and dropped it onto the bed. He did not look tired from the night shift. He never did.

His hair had been cut very short – there were lines along his scalp where the direction of growth altered. The last time she had seen him it had been long and curling around his ears, on the verge of being unkempt, but very attractive. The smell of his wet hair was one of her strongest memories now. Like the feeling of deep humiliation for injuring the junior-school pet rabbit. Like the unhealing gash on her mother's cheek where hospital orderlies had caught her with a metal instrument while wheeling her to the morgue. Bracken burning on the moors.

Excuse me a moment.

He went into the bathroom and there was a trickle of water. In the time she had known him his politeness had never waned. Neither had her enjoyment of it. She glanced at her reflection. The eyes looked dark, shuttered by mascara. The smudged red mouth looked incapable of speech. Something inexact had hold of her. She tried to recall exactly how the nerves at the end of the amputated arm sent signals into the receptors of the bionic limb. How the brain was fluent in the language of electricity.

The shock of the real, she said.

The tap turned off and he came out of the bathroom drying his hands on a towel. He tossed the towel onto the bed, next to his jacket.

Sorry, I didn't hear you. What did you say?

I said, it's strange, each time I see you again. You look different. Altered. You're not like I remember. I have to get used to you.

He smiled. There had always been such invitation between them, always permission. He knew it. And her friends were disquieted.

You too.

Laughter through the open window. A police siren.

It's a little crazy out there.

The weather?

No. After the races.

How was your event? Did they buy books?

Yes. It was fine.

They were at each other's mouths a moment later. She was almost too small for the way he handled her. He liked the blue dress, he told her, it was beautiful, and the stitching, two or three inconsequential stitches, broke, as he lifted it over her head.

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They went out and found a restaurant with courtyard dining and took a table. There was no chill in the air. They did not wear jackets, and the other diners, in their

shoulder straps and short sleeves, seemed convinced that summer had arrived too. They ordered a bottle of wine. To begin with she was chatty and unlike her earlier indeterminate self. He laughed at her jokes. He asked what she was working on. She spoke briefly about the research and handed the subject to him. He had changed rotation within the last week and was now on the psychiatry ward. It wasn't yet very stimulating.

Aren't there some interesting cases? she asked.

There's a man who thinks he's involved in a conspiracy. It's all to do with a biscuit tin.

Is someone taking his biscuits?

He thinks people are communicating about him through the tin. Paranoid.

He lifted his fork and pressed his thumb against the tines, then looked at the three holes imprinted. He had a strong face. His shirts were never pristine. He seemed unmedical, too earthed. She could not imagine him at work, among the corridors and beds, the metal tables.

I'm going to become deskilled.

Deskilled?

Not performing procedures any more. You get rusty if you don't practise. Lots of ulcers to deal with, though. One woman won't get out of bed. She's too exhausted to speak. Her legs are a mess.

He continued to talk about the patients on the ward. The dementia, the bipolar and dissociative disorders. Those who showed no signs of distress about their symptoms. Freud's legacy. There was a woman who had been sectioned because her house was hazardous. She was hoarding all kinds of things: papers, cartons, tins, her own waste. The place was full to the ceiling and stinking. There were narrow routes through the piles, like a warren. There were rats.

I had an argument with another doctor about her. I'm not sure she should really be there. You can't penalise someone for the way they live. And she's not really a danger to herself, or anyone else. Unless her stuff collapses.

It does seem extreme. My father hoards. His attic is on the point of collapse. In fact it has collapsed. Do you think we all have a glitch? A condition, I mean?

Probably. To some degree.

He had ordered venison. It arrived on a white plate, a tidy maroon-centred shank in a shallow wash of pink. He usually ordered the most interesting meat on the menu – liver, foie gras, hare. She liked to watch him eat. He went very carefully through the dense tissue with his knife and worked across the plate until everything was gone. He would put the knife into his mouth if anything stuck

to it. Three or four times during every meal he put the knife there, closing his lips over the blade, slipping it harmlessly along his tongue. The gesture reminded her of television footage of big cats picking up their cubs, lifting the slack bodies harmlessly between their teeth. She was not sure whether these erogenous qualities were noticeable to other people or whether they were simply her invention.

So. What's yours?

My what?

Your condition.

He smiled at her.

I want you all the time. Even right afterwards. I want to break you. It's a sickness.

She laughed.

Sadist.

Under the table, without having to lean too far, he found her leg. He let his hand rest there and with the other he continued to spear his food.

And what's yours?

She had been walking backwards in the pen without looking where she was going. She had crushed the rabbit's paw under her foot by accident. The thing had been pinned. It had twitched and tugged horribly under her shoe. When she'd dragged it from the back of the hutch to investigate the dam-

age its claw had been splayed and bloody. In a remarkable piece of social ostracisation, the whole school had ignored her for a week, but she had not been able to accept the punishment. She kept trying to walk or sit with the other children, even as they spoke among themselves about how stupid she was.

Pathological loneliness.

Really? Interesting. I've never heard of that before.

No. It clearly doesn't exist.

Because of what you do? The isolation?

She reached across the table and cut a piece off his meat, from the end of the steak where the exterior was charred and firm.

Oh. Probably because of where I'm from.

I'll have you certified and make a case study.

Great. Call it a syndrome. Give it your name. Do you want to try some risotto?

Do you want me to finish it?

Yes.

You don't eat much.

I get full up quickly.

After paying the bill they left the restaurant and walked a section of the walls. There was an application on his phone that could photograph the night sky and recognise constellations. They tried, but the light pollution was too great, the stars indistinct.

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They found a club and danced. The music was two decades old, difficult to move to though she knew the songs, and they gave up. They walked back to the hotel. The town had wound out. People were reeling through the streets. They passed a young man with blood running from a wound under his jaw. He was eating chips, impervious to the injury. A girl in a torn blouse was sitting on some church steps vomiting between her legs. Her hair was matted and dripping. A police car sped past almost silently, its rapid blue beam spiralling against the brickwork.

On the ward, she said. The ones who don't care about their illness – why is that?

Hard to say. It's either disease or conversion. It's not well defined.

He pushed her against the wall, slowly, kissed her.

In their room they stripped the heavy coverlet off the bed. The wine had numbed her. There was no pain. Her orgasm was small, towards the base of her spine. He moved her onto all fours. She watched him in the mirror opposite, his head falling forward, and to the side, his brow pleated, his mouth open. He was beautiful to watch. He withdrew and came across her buttocks. The semen was less thick; she felt it trickle as he lifted her up. His chest rose and fell against her back. He kissed her shoulders. He slept first and in

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the morning she woke and turned on her back and gently pressed against her pubic bone. She reached for more painkillers and the glass of water on the bed stand. She watched light gather in the room. So what if she had fallen behind? So what if she was out of sync? It might end. It might.

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In the morning properly they went to the Minster. Another high blue day. The heat was already mature, suggestive of a later season. Men were jumping off a white Bayliner into the river. There were no remaining casualties and the town looked swept of debris. They walked past the riverside swans and geese, ice-cream vendors, picnickers, a funambulist practising between two trees, soft-shoed like a foal.

I read one of your books, he said.

Oh, right. When did that happen?

Recently.

Right. Which one?

There was a discussion. He had thought carefully about what to say. The analysis was astute. She could not tell if anything had altered in his perception of her because of the experience; she thought perhaps it had. Previously, she had doubted whether the work

would be to his taste. Now she was not sure whether that mattered. Though he was not being critical, she began to defend the work, to play up its controversy. As if she had meant all along for the book to be problematic. The discussion became a political debate, which was easier. He took hold of her hand.

I'm having a fantastic time. I really like being with you.

She waited for a moment and then returned the compliment. They walked on.

People were sitting and lying on the grass around the Minster. Inside, most of the building was cordoned off, with a ticket booth controlling entry. They decided not to pay. They could see the colossal stained glass. Veils of coloured light hung over the nave. An official approached them.

First time inside, he asked. Well, it's good you've seen the windows now. They're about to take them down to start cleaning them. Lottery money. It's costing ten million pounds.

The official pointed out a few other noteworthy features inside the cathedral then courteously left them alone and greeted another group. They were both familiar with such places, had a secular interest. Still, the interior was impressive, the size and workmanship. Gold leaf and latticing. Stone tracts and

arches, great masonic veins. It had been built without apathy, an estimation of God, Europe's greatest Gothic enterprise. She envied that certainty.

They lay for a time on the grass behind the cathedral, under the branches of a rustling beech, in reticulated sunlight. She lay with her head on his arm. They kissed, murmured to each other. They were lovers. She found herself counting the hours before his train back. After seeing him off she would drive north. Often the hours before parting were more difficult than the parting itself. He would quieten, and she would feel strangely enlivened, sheer, as if walking close to an edge. She watched the beech leaves flicker and interrupt the sky. She remembered then, something from the article about prostheses. That muscle had its own memory system. That consciously thinking about moving the attached arm, or the leg, would not move it. Those with new limbs needed to become unconcerned about articulation. They simply needed to let the body behave. She told him this. He had not read the article. He said that he would.

I had to help amputate a leg, during my surgical rotation.

Christ! I can't even imagine doing such a thing.

The vascular surgeon took care of most of it. I just

went through the bone. There were problems with the other leg. The patient died.

She lifted her head a fraction and turned to look at him. His eyes were open, staring straight up. She could see through the clear blue yolk of the nearest iris.

That's terrible.

It wasn't really the team's fault. These things happen.

He rolled his head towards her. In the sunlight they looked at each other brightly.

What you do, she said, it's amazing. I couldn't do it. You'd surprise yourself.

No.

He gathered her in. The heat and smell and closeness of him was peculiarly surrounding, amniotic. Something opened in her belly, like a flower carved from air. She thought about the railway station, with its cyclonic roof, the moment when she would step back, the carriage door would beep and close, and the train would pulse as the engine engaged. Her throat began to constrict. She rose out of his embrace. She reached in her bag for a tablet and swallowed it dry.

I think my hangover's coming back. Might have to fight fire with fire. Drink?

Yeah, great. Let's go to one of the places on the river.

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There was a small crowd outside the Minster when they rounded the corner. People were sitting on the steps, queuing outside the stall. At first it looked like a stunt, the horse hammering down the street, the empty carriage swerving behind, and the driver half standing, the reins gripped in his fists. The driver was calling to the horse, whoa, whoa, in a tone of irrefutable stewardship, but something was wrong. She took his arm and pointed. The white shire kicked on, coming towards the crowd, its hooves ringing heavily on the tarmac. It kept coming. The weight of the beast. Its breast working like a machine. Its fore and hind legs riving. Thirty feet from them the horse cut between two bollards and as the carriage hit tore out of its tack. There was the sick sound of brass and wood splintering. The driver flipped from his seat like an unbolted piece and landed lengths ahead. The shire kicked away, its reins trailing, its eye white-cupped and livid. It passed her at the exact moment she thought about stepping out with her arms held up. She felt its wake.

He had already broken from the crowd and was running towards the injured man. He was almost to him when she looked over. She hadn't seen him run before. For every human the action is never as imagined. Then he was kneeling, going to work. His back was to her. She couldn't see what he was doing. Checking the neck perhaps, or the head. The wrists, which had been held out like frail instruments to break the man's fall. His head turned slightly. He was talking as he ministered to the man, asking questions, or issuing instructions. Others began to arrive and cluster round, and her view of him was obscured.

She looked down the street after the horse but it had kept going and was gone. Spectators were walking purposefully towards the scene of the accident. They passed her, their faces set in expressions of shock and disbelief. Still she did not move. She looked after the horse. How real it had seemed, a truly designed thing. Someone would have to catch it before it damaged itself. She took a few steps, as if to follow, then turned and came slowly towards the glut of people. A woman was trying to steward, to move everyone back.

Give him some air. Come on.

Within minutes a medical vehicle arrived and two

jacketed paramedics made their way into the fray, one carrying a grey case. The bole of onlookers expanded and thinned. Information was passed between people. She heard talk of the horse having been hit by a taxi, or being spooked by a horn. She saw him. He was standing back, letting the paramedics work. The driver lay on his side, unmoving, then moving economically, but not his lower half. She did not approach. The paramedics stepped in and out, knelt and rose. He was walking towards her when someone in the crowd pointed over and a paramedic called him back. There was a consultation, or he was being thanked. He had been born the year she'd left home. That seemed impossible.

When they regained each other she embraced him. She did not know what else to do. The emotion was like fear, or the abating of fear, and it overtook her and made her grip the back of his shirt. She released him and he gave a brief report. The driver had probably broken a hip. There were bad abrasions. There was no trauma to the head. But he seemed not to care about his injuries. All he had kept asking was whether the horse was hurt.

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She drove back across the Pennines. On the moorland the bracken was beginning to regenerate. Tight green spirals were coming up through the sea of dead stalks. The curled fronds looked ovarian. Like the illustration of these organs they had shown her to explain. Now the word and the picture and the bracken were the same somehow. She entered a belt of cloud. The light became more complicated, dense, unfiltered, west coast light. Her phone on the dashboard had chimed and was flashing. He always texted afterwards, to thank her. She would reply similarly. Then they would wait a few days before contacting each other again. She had begun to bleed, lightly. She could feel the intimate transit of fluid. The reassurance this sensation had once provided was fading. There was no meaning to it. She did not want to go back to the house yet and so she took a turning off the main road, south, towards her friend. She could call in without notice. The child meant they were rarely out, and it was not too late. She felt like telling her friend that it was wrong of her to have said the things she had. She was not deferring the hard things in life. Her friend was privileged and she did not know it. The assumptions were careless and because they were careless they were also cruel. She pictured a harsh exchange between them, bitter revelations, a dramatic exit.

But she knew she was not really angry with her friend. There was no point in trying to ground her frustration. No one was to blame. Retaliation would be unfair. She turned off the road again, this time onto a small country lane. She parked in a gravel lay-by and looked up at the hills. On the slopes the previous year's bracken was rust-coloured and collapsing, the fresh underlay was taking hold. With all the talk of carcinogens they did not burn it back as often as they used to. She had not smelled that fragrance in a long time. It would be dark soon. She knew she should visit her father, who did not live far away. But his endless hope would be too wearing. The cottage would be thick with dust and newspapers, unrinsed bottles. It would smell of mould and be full of loss. In her purse were the white boxes. After she had left the train station she had bought three packets of painkillers, from different pharmacies. It had been easy. Her mother had been the same age.

She had on heeled shoes from being in the city, from being with her lover, from moving among the public as if she was someone else. And the striped dress. What would they say about her attire, if they found her in the bracken? Perhaps they would say she had prepared. She sat in the car. She could still

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smell his wet hair, remember the feeling of its damp warmth between her fingers. Remembering their exchanges was like engaging in them again. The memories and the acts were almost the same. Whenever he came inside her it stung. Towards the end of their time together he would gauge how sore she was. He knew the difference between pleasure and discomfort, though the two were so closely aligned. She had brought him so close. And yet so much was unspeakable.

The hills were around her. She took up her purse, opened the car door and stepped into them. It was like opening a book.