

Isobel English

BREATH OF LOVE

IN THE LIFT going up she leaned towards him suddenly—a curiously childish gesture that was a mingling of gratitude and pleasure.

He looked down at the narrow white face that was within an eyelash breadth of his own, and thought: she looks pale and uninteresting now like the ski run for beginners at St. Moritz. Does she expect me to kiss her? How forward and un-English!

He pushed the green pork-pie hat farther on to the back of his head and was about to put out his hand to reward her with a delicate flick on the lobe of her ear, when the lift stopped abruptly and the gilded doors slid automatically open, exposing them to the critical eyes of a short blonde woman who had been awaiting their arrival.

"It's after midnight." Her voice was high-pitched and querulous; the flat statement was delivered with all the undertones of someone who wishes to impart the subtle extent of her own martyrdom. "All right, Louis. Thank you for bringing her home. Ellie *is* only seventeen, you know. Oh! well, never mind. Good-night, Goodnight."

The door of the flat closed noiselessly behind the two women.

"Now quickly to bed, Ellie. It never does any good to stay out so late. You only cheapen yourself in the end."

Ellie went in to the sitting-room where the bed was made up on the seven-foot sofa; a tray with milk and biscuits had been left on the stool. She walked across the thick carpet carefully with long pushing strides as if she was still on the skating rink. A hot flood of self-consciousness stained her cheeks as she unbuttoned her dress—supposing, oh! supposing he thought I expected to be kissed; the idea was appalling. Certainly, she must never see him after that.

"Martha", she called out suddenly after she had eased her way like a chrysalis

into the tight binding of the cold sheets, "Do you think Louis is old looking for his age? He's a year more than me. I think he looks at least twenty-five."

But there was no answer to her question. Her sister had already disappeared into her own bedroom, and no light shone from beneath the door.

Outside the heavy mahogany door of the flat, Louis paused, but only for the second that it took him to put on his hat again; this time he tilted it slightly forward, pinching it into shape over his left eye. Then he pushed the bell to summon the lift.

What an odd little girl, he thought. She was so thin and pale—like an ironing board all the way up. Nearly the whole evening she had been stiff and unresponsive, skating always close to the barrier by herself; never risking the centre of the rink where the other boys on hockey skates like himself hurtled dangerously in and out of the smooth glidings of the figure skaters.

Over a lemonade she had said, always looking down so that the heavy white lids hooded her eyes and he had only the movements of her mouth to interpret: "Have you always lived in Belgium?"

In answer he had snapped open his stainless-steel cigarette-case and held it towards her. There was a feeling of male pride in the gesture; a challenge that waited for the small hand with its short pared nails to hover like a distracted moth over the flaming gilt of the lining, then fumble with the elastic band—perhaps crumbling the tip of the cigarette as they released it. Instead: "I don't smoke, thank you all the same"—and then she had added with a self-knowledge that was almost prim in its completeness: "I'm too young."

This reply had jarred on him, making him regret his offer; but, he consoled himself, this was only one evening out of a whole life-time. It need never be repeated. His English mother had merely said with the authority with which he knew he must comply: "Madame de la Frèloniere's young sister is coming over before Easter. It won't hurt you to take her out to the cinema, or skating one evening."

The impermanence of their relationship had made him suddenly feel better. Without warning he had parted the meekly folded hands from each other, and, putting one in his own, he drew her gently across the white powdered coconut matting to the edge of the ice.

"I'm going to take you into the middle", he had said, staring into her large blank eyes, and before she could strain backwards or even register the impulse to do so, he had her wholly within the controlled area of his arms responding to the

rhythmic swish of his own skates as they turned and swayed backwards and forwards to the lilt of the Strauss waltz.

"You dance very nicely when you let yourself go", he said. "Don't be nervous now, I'm going to spin. Just hold on tight and follow. You can feel the rhythm, can't you?"

Ellie had begun to regain her habitual self-consciousness and anxiety. He had taken her hand so suddenly and pushed her on to the ice that she had no time even to think, let alone imagine the consequences if she fell. For, at that precise moment, she had been sunk in the web of her own fantasy, thinking that she had really replied quite neatly to his offer of a cigarette. She had been aware of the quality of challenge in his tone, and somehow hoped and expected him to carry it a step further, perhaps forcing her to take one. She recalled with mounting excitement the game of "Truths and Forfeits" that they had played at a party last Christmas.

These thoughts had so engaged her that the reality of their swift flight on to the ice had not penetrated as a danger or threat until she suddenly heard the words: "Hold on! I am going to spin!"

Then her feet had splayed out wildly, her legs become as two wooden sticks, helpless, with uncontrollable metal weights at their base. Her hands had clutched into the stuff of his tweed jacket and she had screamed: "Stop it! I can't skate. This is the first time I've ever been on the ice."

In her fear, she had become without warning enormously desirable to Louis. Her terrified face so near to his own now had the exquisite greenish pallor that he remembered in the petals of the wood anemones that he had seen growing on the fringes of the Ardennes. Her great eyes were splashed with amber like the eyes of a furious tabby cat, and her mouth that had remained so primly pursed all the evening was now slightly open and revealed the tip of a warm pink tongue. He just prevented himself from touching the end of her nose with his own, when he remembered of course that she was an English school-girl who would probably repeat everything to her sister, who in turn would wittily re-enact it at the bridge table for the benefit of his mother, who might at a later date be inclined to take it out of him by knocking a hundred francs off his monthly allowance.

Back on the safety of the hairy matting, Ellie's thin-boned legs had become like brittle glass. The now unmanageable hired boots that were a size too large made her turn over sharply on her ankle in a sudden painful twist.

Her face was quite pink and hot, and this rapid transition from white to rose-red and the fact that her eyes were glittering with unshed tears, had an unexpected tenderising effect on the hard little mind of Louis. He took out the clean white

handkerchief that he carried in his top pocket only for show, and, turning away, blew noisily into it.

When Ellie woke up next morning, all the bedclothes had slipped off the velvet sofa on to the floor, and she lay unweighted and shivering beneath the papery thinness of the sheets.

Something rasped at the back of her throat like a hard immovable pebble.

She sat up, and all the rest of her felt new and excited; there was just this isolated little pain that she could quite easily separate from her real sense of well-being—if anything it rather accentuated it.

Martha called from the kitchen: "There's a letter for you, delivered by hand. It must have been pushed through the outer door early this morning and the concierge brought it up with the papers."

She came into the room, her blonde curls skewered to her head with numerous pins; she was completely made-up, all but the heavy arches of her eyebrows that were still white with drifts of face-powder. When she noticed the waxen pallor of her young sister's face it made her immediately angry, unsympathetic in a censorious way: "You'll jolly well get to bed before nine tonight", she said. "Mother would be furious if she knew I let you stay out half the night."

Ellie held for a minute the thick white envelope between her fingers: the unexpected touch of the crisp purple lining gave her extraordinary pleasure. She read quickly what was written on the single sheet—larger and as stiff as a postcard, but with rough edges:

Dear Ellie:

Will you come out with me this afternoon? There is a place called the Angleterre where we could have tea and dance.

Please telephone to let me know.

Bien à vous,

Louis.

Later as she zipped herself into the short woollen dress that her mother had made out of only two and a half yards of material, Ellie felt thin and depressed; the wide suède belt hardly gripped into her waist however much she pulled at it.

"I wish I had a bosom." Martha heard the remark from the bedroom where she was painting her eyes; it sounded to her grotesque and slightly improper; then it ignited a tiny doubt that had been hovering at the back of her mind; Louis Valton

did after all have the reputation in the town of being a girl chaser. He was eighteen, but that amounted to full maturity on the Continent. My God! Supposing. . . .

She came swiftly into the sitting-room and, almost before she could stop herself, the words were out of her mouth: "Did Louis kiss you last night, Ellie?"

If she heard the question, she did not answer. Ellie was moving about in the bathroom clinking together glasses and bottles. "Martha", she asked thickly, as if it hurt her, "have you got any gargle? My throat feels a bit funny."

I am not really angry with her, Martha thought. She's a pathetic little creature really, but she *can* be quite amusing in a naïve way. No! he couldn't possibly have kissed her, she re-assured herself. "Top shelf, on the left hand side", she called. "Use it with half water."

When Ellie came out of the bathroom, she was fully dressed. Her long heavy hair was brushed so hard that it hung in two silvery curtains on either side of her face; short ends crackling with electricity stood out in a ragged fringe on her high forehead.

She had used the top of her lipstick to work some colour into the cheeks; the effect was almost natural.

"You look better now", Martha said. "We'll drink some coffee before we go out shopping. This afternoon Jacques thought you might like to drive into Brussels." She was busy at her desk; the sofa was cleared, all the bedclothes neatly folded away into the large Empire chest by the window.

Louis Valton has asked me out this afternoon—it would have been simple to say just that; but already on this uncluttered and smooth mind vague subterfuges and plans of deception were beginning to cast their complicated shadows. Should she say that she felt ill? Her throat certainly did ache when she thought about it. If her sister and brother-in-law went to Brussels she could probably manage to go out with Louis and be back on the sofa by the time they came in. The telephone call this morning would be tricky.

"What about your letter?" Martha took the words out of her mouth. "Have you been asked out?"

Ellie said in a voice that was more naturally her own than any of the slightly deceitful thoughts that had preceded it: "Louis has asked me to go out with him this afternoon to the Angleterre. He said to telephone this morning to say if I could."

How beautifully simple it had been! Martha raised her eyebrows but only enough to show pleased surprise: "How very nice, darling. The Angleterre is one of the best hotels in the town. I'll help you to get Louis's number."

As she waited for the connection on the telephone, Ellie felt herself lulled—completely detached like a clever doll who had only to utter the word “Mama” for something nice to happen.

Before she could announce herself, she heard the deep foreign voice that she had only partly forgotten: “To whom have I the honour?” it enquired in French.

Across her mind’s eye there came suddenly from the shallow reaches of her child’s memory the picture of swarthy Charles Boyer peeling from the inside of her desk; long afternoons at half term with Martha’s portable gramophone out in the fields; the insidious melancholy of the singer’s tones that embraced all life. She had started a poem at the time that began: “Oh! Green is the Colour I Adore in my Sorrow. . . .”; but she had never got any further.

Now she spoke softly into the hard black mouth of the telephone: “This is Ellie”, she said. “Ellie Sykes.”

The tall plane trees of the park were blurred and softened in their skeleton outlines by the first tendrils of spring; their piebald barks gleamed again with the slow rise of the sap.

Sitting on a bench, Ellie felt the soft breath of the wind soughing the topmost branches as part of her own happy surprise. Louis’s square forehead looked to her as white and solid as an Arab fortress. He was holding her hand.

“I might see you in England if I come over”, he was saying, employing the cautious technique of someone who does not wish to inspire too much hope. His English was faultless and without accent; only sometimes there was a staccato running together and precise enunciation that sounded peculiar to her ears.

“I’m not allowed out much”, she told him. “My parents are rather old. It wouldn’t be the same thing at all in England.”

Mother and Father would look with destructive clarity through all this, Ellie thought. They would insist with their superior knowledge that it had probably never happened; in the end the pink-shining cheeks of Louis would shrivel to the limp white paper of fiction. He would become quite soon like the disillusionment she had suffered when she discovered that Freddie Bartholomew was only a shadow projected on to a blank screen, and not as she had supposed a lonely little boy imprisoned in a room behind it.

“You know what I thought of you when you came to meet me this afternoon?” Louis said laughingly. “I thought Ellie walks like a little *pompier*. Do you know what that means?”

Ellie knew, and a little breath of coldness struck her. *Pompier*s were *firemen*, and they had huge feet, larger even than the already embarrassing size six that she had to admit to, or at any rate five and a half. So he thought of her as this ungraceful goose-stepping monster who would only come into its own at the dramatic moment when the tongues of flame reflected in its brass helmet.

"No", she said firmly, "I don't know what it means."

She felt the greyness of misunderstanding envelop her, immediately closing all chinks in her armour through which sympathy might seep.

His hand fell heavily on her thin shoulder; it was hardly protected by the wide collar of grey rabbit with which her mother had refurbished her old coat before her coming to Belgium. She nearly screamed, and would have shaken herself free of the invading hand, but he twisted her face round now towards his so that she was forced to look into his wide open eyes—two luminous pools and at the centre the little black specks that were the seat of intelligence and all outward comprehension.

"Don't you think it's funny", he insisted, "my description of you as a Little Fireman? Are you offended because I didn't say you glided like a swan?"

Ellie felt herself completely trapped. All that she could think of now was to put her head down and butt her way out of the enclosure of his arms. I don't want to be seen too close, she thought desperately. No one can make fun of me like that and then think that they can shame me because I show my feelings.

"I don't mind", she said coolly when she had freed herself and the reality of her words took shallow root: "I must be getting back fairly soon though, my sister will be waiting for me. I've had rather a sore throat all day."

His eyes at this distance seemed to be very blue and clear; a curious weakness drew her inevitably towards the pink chin so recently shaved of its scant bristles. The skin was fresh and clear without any dark hollows or plains that she would not be able to understand. Everything was suddenly simple, and the kiss that he dropped so lightly on her mouth made no demands; it tasted of something so sweet and unknown that she wanted to open her parched lips to taste for more.

Ellie from her newly elevated happiness wondered vaguely about the other girls that Louis must have kissed. With a certain painless cynicism she wondered too at what point the attachment of today became the embarrassment of tomorrow; then with a clearer sense of reality she wondered what would be expected of her if they should ever meet again.

Something strange was going on between two people on a bench a little way off. Ellie watched the unified swaying of the two entwined bodies and observed

for the first time the flat splayed fingers of the man's hand in the hollow of the woman's back—just above her waist.

The acid pink colour of the block of flats had a disorienting effect upon Ellie as she stood just within the glass porch and waited for the release of the main door's catch from the flat above. There was a small metal plate on the right hand side perforated with holes; through this came the voice of Martha in answer to her ring. It sounded thick and lazy, she thought, as if she had been smoking a lot of cigarettes.

Ellie rode up in the lift alone and it seemed that an artificial heat enveloped her body. She knew that she had a colour; in the park, walking arm in arm, Louis had said: "You look quite different from the first time I saw you. You know you're a pretty girl, Ellie."

Now she was bathed in this soft damp heat; the short ends of hair on her neck had divided in snail-like curls. It was what she had imagined it must be like if you drank whisky, only now she had complete control over her usually awkward limbs.

Martha opened the front door of the flat, and Ellie floated in, it seemed, a little above the level of the carpet.

"You look very flushed", Martha said without any real concern. "Do you feel all right? Jacques is going to take us out to dinner and then to a night club. Do hurry, darling, and put on your blue dress."

Ellie found on looking into the bathroom glass that the pale lipstick she used no longer showed against the suffused scarlet of her cheeks; almost in a trance she went through her sister's make-up drawer until she found a deep colour that pleased and shocked her.

How long could it last, this warmth that was so sweet and heady? Outside on the thin city trees birds still twittered and crooned: I do not know their names, she thought, and yet their sweet notes pierce my heart.

Martha said when her sister came out of the bathroom dressed in the blue silk dress that was only just—because she had persuaded Mother to cut off the puffed sleeves—only just *not* a party dress: "That's the most becoming dress I've ever seen you in. It really does something for you."

The bell rang and Ellie could hear the voice of her brother-in-law speaking to the person who waited on the pavement below. He spoke rapidly in French,

and the words so closely strung together made no encroachment on the fund of thrummy French love songs that made up the greater part of her vocabulary.

As he waited by the front door, Martha, her thin nervous fingers held out stiffly before her, attempted to blow upon the blood-red lacquer which she had just applied. "Four glasses", she said sharply to Ellie. "Out of that cupboard. No darling, not those, the short square-based ones. Do use your head." And then by way of compensation to wipe out her irritability: "We do hope you'll like Henri, he's coming out with us tonight. He's got the most lovely chateau near Namur."

Ellie wheeled round on her little Spanish heels. "You never told me anyone was coming", she said. "I don't want to go out with someone I don't know. I shan't know what to say."

Martha closed her full red lips over the beautiful teeth which she was so proud of showing: tiny seams appeared at the corners of her eyes that cut deeply into the pearly surface of her skin. "Don't be a little ass, Ellie." She felt suddenly old and worn; the inconsistency of her younger sister, the unpredictability of this half-fledged creature made her own smooth well-controlled manners seem dead and pointless, like the endless stretches of holland covering fitted on to upholstery; they had the unalterable solidity of great comfort and excessive boredom.

When the Belgian baron was introduced, he bent low over the timidly outstretched hand of Ellie. "Martha", he said in perfect English, "you did not tell me that your sister was an English rose."

Ellie thought—It is going to be all right, he's not as bad as I had imagined. I wish he was a bit taller. Then she said with a curious ease that was so new to her that the practice of it was like some delightful form of juggling in which she was always certain to catch the ball: "It must be the Belgian air. I'm as pale as a bowl of milk when I'm at home."

The night club they came to after the long session of dinner under white fluorescent light, seemed to Ellie like a corner of Hell. Everything—the walls, the padded seats along them, and even the tops of the tables—was a deep fiery red. There was a dry heat too, a dry heat that was stirred up but not replenished by the whirring wheels of fans set high in the walls. Both Henri and her brother-in-law as they smiled and grimaced in the dull red light had the appearance of demons.

Martha would never stop talking, Ellie thought. She had it all so beautifully planned out, from the first movement of the day when with sealed eyelids she felt

on the bedside table for the glass of concentrated lemon juice that was so good for her, to the last pull on the electric light cord as she collapsed on the pillows, and "Lord! I'm tired" was all she ever allowed to escape as she closed the heavily creamed eyelids and started from scratch the dreary business of complete relaxation beginning with the joints of her toes.

There was a large coloured photograph of the ex-King of the Belgians hanging on one of the red walls. Ellie, looking absently about, was suddenly drawn towards the shocking blue of the picture's eyes. Leopold II, the bereaved King, she remembered, who had lost his Queen in a car smash on a mountain pass. Once, in the paper lining of a drawer, she had come across a picture of her in a spiked tiara, then on the same page another showing the face of the dead Queen camouflaged with lace and waxy flowers as she lay in state before her burial.

Ellie's throat all at once began to prick in alarmingly sharp stabs; what had been underlying her consciousness all the day now presented itself so forcefully that it was impossible to ignore any more.

There were women in black evening dresses walking around, not quite waitresses, and yet they must be for they moved from table to table. It seemed imperative now to Ellie to attract their attention.

"I wonder", she said, leaning forward to speak to her sister so that her whole body nearly toppled across the table, "I wonder if you could possibly ask one of those people to get me some aspirins."

She felt breathless and scorched-up as if all the moisture in her body had gradually been wrung out. A definite aching spread upwards from the middle of her back; the contact of the cold glass of lemonade was painful to her fingers.

The necessity for aspirin now seemed like a pinnacle of faith to be achieved; all her life depended on it. Then there they were, three white pills on a saucer before her, so fast it seemed that she had hardly time to finish her request. She picked them up one by one, rolling them between her fingers and saying very loudly because she wanted to make herself heard above the noise of the band, "Bayer", before she swallowed them. "That's good, isn't it, darling? Soon I'll be all right."

Back at the flat extraordinary changes had occurred that Ellie could not account for. She lay now in the middle of her sister's double bed and only for an instant did the thought cross her mind—I wonder where *they'll* sleep. Then it was gone, washed away into a sea of pain above which she could not rise. Heat

and cold in great waves struck across her shuddering body; yet there was no heart to the pain, she could not locate from where it was coming.

A strange man told her to open her mouth and with a long probe scratched the back of her throat. The pain was fantastic, but it lasted only a second.

"*Angine*", she heard across the cloudy wastes, "*Angine de Vincent*." What a beautiful name, she thought, but he is mistaking me for someone else. Then she heard Martha explaining it all away: "You've got quinsy, darling, that's what it's called in French. A very bad kind of sore throat, but it will soon clear up."

Some time later Martha was leaning close to her face; she held in her hand a little square of cambric with which she covered her mouth. "Ellie", she said, "don't be frightened, but we can't look after you in the flat any more. Jacques has got to work every day and he can't if he doesn't get a good night's rest. He hasn't slept for three nights. The place we're sending you to is in a lovely position; the nuns that run it are angelic and we'll come and see you every day."

The room they carried her to was large and white; the bed higher than any that she had ever seen. Ellie wondered for a minute how they would get her on to it without the help of a step-ladder, but they slid her effortlessly into the sheets.

Martha went excitedly through a door and she could hear in the distance the powerful gush of water: "You've got your own bathroom", she said as she sat down beside the bed.

To the white-coifed Sister, waiting patiently for her to go, she said: "You *will* look after her, *ma Soeur*", almost as if she did not believe in the possibility.

Before she left, Martha opened the clasp of her large crocodile bag and flipped on to the sheet, within reach of Ellie's still hands, a letter: "Read it when you feel better. It came by the second post."

Ellie watched her go. She did not touch the letter. Somehow she must rally together the small forces of her strength so that she could commence the battle of her recovery. She knew that without a doubt it could be done now, but she must begin first by finding the most comfortable position to lie in.

They brought her a plate of oysters that she could not look at, then later a plate of finely-minced raw meat; yet they did not force her against her will. Once she asked in English for hot milk — when it came the spoon standing up in the glass was so tall it reminded her for a fearful moment of the doctor's probe.

Much later, when the lights in the Avenue outside were on, Ellie was slowly filled with a sense of intense happiness and exaltation. She pulled herself gingerly

up on her pillows and surveyed for the first time every detail, far and near, of the pleasantly furnished room.

A letter had been put by someone on the top of the bedside cupboard. It was unopened and she thought that she might try to read it.

The thick white parchment of the envelope was an effort to rip open; without looking she could feel the softer tissue of the lining and experience again with her fingers the remembered pleasure of the purple—the colour of dog violets.

The writing was large and widely spaced; the words quite steady before her eyes:

My Little Ellie: (it said).
You must get better quickly. Already it is
too long since I saw you.
I am going to England tomorrow for a year's
apprenticeship in an office. I will be there
before you, but I shall wait for you.
Get well and walk towards me again.
I embrace you tenderly with my heart — Little
Fireman.

Louis.