

The Good-Morrow

by Sigune

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: The usual disclaimers apply, and the title was snatched from a marvellous poem by John Donne.

This is London, on a greyish morning in early autumn. It has rained all last night, and right now the sun is timidly attempting to dispel the wasted clouds that will insist on making the day look dreary. A meagre ray of light peeks through the white gauze curtains and makes its way across a cotton bedspread to where a man and woman lie sleeping side by side.

He is the first to awaken, blinking because the soft morning light has found his eyes; she sleeps on, curled up next to him, her face against the pillow. He gazes at the ceiling for a while, allowing his eyes to adjust to the day, and his mind to the past night. He finds that he is strangely at rest: not excited, not jubilant, but comfortable; and therefore he decides that it was good. He closes his eyes again, just for a moment, his thoughts fuzzier and his body lazier than usual in the morning. Perhaps it is the unfamiliar proximity of another human being, and his newly acquired taste of her.

His eyes glide across the room. It is bright and spacious, the wooden floor warm and gleaming and the bedclothes crisp, white and pearly grey, the furnishings of a tasteful, deliberate bareness—no frills and no clutter, no knickknacks to gather dust, no exuberant ornamentation for the woman who sleeps here. To the left of the bed they share stands a large pine wardrobe that may be antique; to the right is a dressing table that seems to serve as a writing desk, displaying, as it does, some books, a pad of notepaper and a silver ink stand. On the chair in front and the clothes rack next to it are draped his black robes and her grey gown, carefully unbuttoned and unzipped and hung there the night before, as neither of them felt that haste had any justifiable part in the proceedings.

At their age, they are self-conscious and perhaps too aware of their inexperience to be truly uninhibited. After nearly forty years in this body, he knows every bump and every hollow of it, every blemish, roughness and smoothness of skin, hardness of bone. He can tell every reaction to any action, itch and ache and delight. He was as familiar with himself as he was unfamiliar with her until a mere few hours ago; and he knows she felt the same, and it is why they took their time. They knew all too well that they were stripping away their armour, the layer under which they had been hiding their disadvantages, the self-created exterior they presented to the world. Taking it off would leave them bare and vulnerable and distinctly unimpressive, so they hesitated at every fastener to search for confirmation in each other's eyes. They fiercely loathe and dread embarrassment; the step they took has required much preparation, and still insecurity hovered at the edge of their brains. But they were determined. Neither of them would have let it come that far—the two of them undressing in a bedroom—if there had not been a greater purpose, a larger scope, the foundations of something more than just a swift entanglement, a quick pleasure, which in their view is too fickle, too trivial to be worthy of consideration, and the exposure far too great for the fleeting recompense. They don't want talk. They don't want affairs. They want security, and stability, and everything weatherproof and watertight, or at least as much as possible.

They have known each other for years, and though there always was some sense of complicity between them, they have felt no need for togetherness before. They drifted apart after school and never tried to prevent it, content with leading their self-absorbed existences and pursuing their respective aims. They have lost their innocence and faith along the way. They have been deceived and betrayed in a thousand different manners, in matters large and small, and by too many people. They have been traitors in their turn, have spited some, broken others, and enjoyed it. But eventually they tired of the whirling game, or of its unbroken continuity, and it occurred to them that even a hurricane has a heart, and it is quiet and still. So they went looking for that calm in memories, their relics of before the fall, and remembered, and reached back. They set to

exploring, to tentatively advancing, to establishing they could still trust each other.

He does not believe that people change. He knows he, for one, has not. His aims are still what they were twenty years ago; he has only adapted his tactics. He has grown subtler, more agile and more knowledgeable; he has gained poise. In essence, he is still the same; apparent differences are only those of seedlings turned into tall trees. She, too, is reassuringly recognisable: he has found her just like he had left her. She knows more tricks, she has refined her technique, but her thinking moves along familiar lines. He has the key to most of her riddles. She is like a favourite cloak stowed away for the summer and rediscovered when the season turns cold.

He thinks of her mainly in terms of absences: absence of anger, absence of disdain, absence of disgust, absence of annoyance, absence of stupidity, absence of frustration, absence of irritation. He will probably never arrive at passion, but that is not necessarily a bad thing, as only his hatred is fierce. She is like a blank space. He has not found the words to fill her out, and that is a relief to both of them, for his words are daggers always, and after years of training his tongue as a sharp weapon, he seems incapable of twisting it into saying something sweet. So she has told him she prefers him speechless, but will make occasional allowance for mild irony.

She makes a sound; she is still dreaming. It is a kind of hissing sigh, and he likes to imagine it is his name, whispered in the twilight realm beyond sleep's border. Surely he can indulge in a small vanity.

A lock of long hair has fallen over her face. It has the colour of ground white pepper, or sand, or something other of an indefinite hue; and most of the time it looks as if the lady on whose head it grows has recently been electrocuted. He knows she never combs or brushes it – it is no use, she has quite given up on attempts to bend it to her will or even just untangle it. He never runs his fingers through it, they might get permanently stuck. He has found that it is best to stroke it, starting at the widow's peak on her forehead and flattening the untidy mass with his hand, or else to start at the nape of her neck and move upwards, until it looks like an extravagant wig worn upside down; but that last option risks to obscure her face, and he finds that, having gained some confidence, he will want to read her expression when they love.

Now he turns himself and comes to lie on his left side, leaning on his elbow and resting his head on his hand, and in this position he observes his sleeping companion, gracing her with the kind of scientific interest he usually reserves for complex potions and spells. Her body fascinates him, for he is intrigued by the laws of cause and effect. He analyses in his mind its responses to touch (soft, rough, flitting, brushing, chafing, pressing, pinching; with fingertips or palms, lips, tongue, cheeks, belly, thighs – the possibilities are nearly endless) and movement (swift or slow – he could add a scale – with fingertips or palms, lips, tongue, cheeks, belly, thighs, the usual, again) and considers charting them (when and where, once or repeatedly, how long), in order to enable accurate predictions for future experiments and assure success; but he drives the thought away, because doubtless he is not the first to come up with an idea of the kind, many will have written manuals before him, and as such the speculation is purely a waste of time. But if his thoughts are unoriginal, his experience is unique, like cutting the pages of a new book, or mapping a new country, and yet repeatable with variations, and appealing. He will never tell her that, of course, but even so, he suspects that she knows already.

He resists the urge to trace her profile with his fingers, for fear of disturbing her slumber and having to say something nice and of being caught in the act of touching, when the desire for it is something with which he has still to come to terms. He suspects it is inspired by a slightly detached interest in the fact that her nose, which is beaky and a tad too large, seems quite desperately in love with her sharp chin, which in turn reaches up towards it, lending her a remarkable likeness to those images of moon sickles with faces you see everywhere. He is ready to bet that in a hundred years or so she will look exactly like the witch from Hansel and Gretel, or from Rapunzel, or any other of those ghastly crones that peopled the gruesome bedtime stories of his childhood days. This is very well; by that time he will be a decrepit old Dark wizard with cruel eyes and claw-like fingers, and they will, as caricatures of their younger selves, haunt the nightmares of innocent little children together and take pleasure from it. But here and now her skin is smooth and tight and soft to the touch, her mouth alluring in a deep shade of pink, and she possesses the dignity of the feline, that species of which even the most miserable creature exudes worth. Ugliness can be glorious and savoured for its own sake, like the morbid aesthetics of Gothic art or the bombast of Victorian design. Hers is splendiferous; she wears it like a royal honour. Attitude is everything.

And look, here she wakes to the distant buzzing of the traffic in the street. Her pale lashes flutter, her breaths grow deeper, and she moans, reluctant to let sleep go. He watches her attentively and registers everything, as is his habit: her sticky eyelids, the way she swallows, the quiet heaving of her ribcage, the flexing and relaxing of her limbs, the blind movement of her left hand as it wanders, searching, over the white sheet's creases. A smile of amusement flits across his lips and he refuses to give in, though he knows what she is after. She can manage without help. Soon her hand will encounter warm skin, and touch it, nothing more, looking only for confirmation of his presence.

This is London, on a dreary morning, and the autumn sky is grey. That is fine. They like it that way.
