

Melissa Hardy / THE LOVER OF THORNTON AVENUE

On one of their stolen nights together, standing in the middle of the park by the World War I Memorial, John had kissed her out of the light of the street-lamps, teasing, warning her, "Don't close your eyes, Anne. If illicit lovers close their eyes when they kiss, they grow to enormous size and can be seen for miles around." John was always erupting into whimsy. Fissures, she thought, crackling out from the long fault line which cut his personality jaggedly in half. ("If you think my husband's strange," she told her brother Raymond long distance — he lived in Montreal with his gay lover — "you should meet this crackpot.")

Testing this theory, Anne had closed her eyes, and, kissing him, had grown to immense proportions. Straightaway she was spotted by a woman who went to the same exercise studio as she did. The woman walked her dog at night in the park. Neither Anne nor John — eyes closed, bodies joined with such sweet pain at the hips — was aware of their presence, of the dog's rapt circling of the memorial as, snuffling, it received messages encoded in urine, or the woman's cat eyes in the dark. Only later, days later, when the woman turned to her in the change room of the studio and said, "Your husband's shaved that lovely great walrus's moustache," did Anne know they had been seen. "Oh, yes. A terrible mistake. He's growing it back," she assured the woman. Seen, but not found out.

But that was long ago — early, wet Spring — and now it was high summer, dry as a bone after a winter with little snow, the level of the lake low, a city-wide ban imposed on gratuitous lawn watering. Anne's husband Alex stood, gazing out the living room window at the street. He was surreptitiously watering the front lawn — he had put down new seed that year — and so must keep a look-out for the police who cruised the area in search of just such disobedient householders. All up and down the quiet street, neighbours kept watch over illicit sprin-

klers in the grainy dusk. It was mid-July, eight-thirty on a Wednesday night.

John had left just a few weeks before, transferred to Pickering, three hours away, less, if, as sometimes happened, the traffic on the 401 was light. Anne had hoped he would continue to see her, but he thought it best they end. Affairs were not convenient at such a remove and lately he had been unable to look his wife in the eye or even to make love to her. It seemed that, along with all his other streaks, went a moral one that Anne had been surprised to discover entirely lacking in herself. She had been married to Alex for only three years when she met John and had cheated on Alex, when the opportunity had arisen to do so, with not only very little compunction but with enthusiasm.

Anne was very sad that John had left. She had fallen in love with him. This was not surprising. Anne fell in love at the drop of a hat, at the drop of a shoe. She staggered through life like a drunk through a minefield, but without a drunkard's luck — she detonated every mine she came near.

"I'm only surprised it didn't happen sooner," Raymond told her over the phone when she complained, "But I thought I was safe, that, now that I was married, I wouldn't put myself through this particular hideous great wringer anymore."

"I know, I know," he commiserated. "The agony. The ecstasy. But there's no going against type, Anne. All of us are like that. You. Me. Dad was too. It's in the blood."

"But what do I do now?" she wailed.

Knowing that she was fatally flawed in this respect, that the gene she bore within her for straying, for hungry-heartedness, made her a criminal element in the world of neat streets and small houses and nuclear families in which she found herself, was no help. She must mourn and not appear to mourn. She must put her life back together again when no one knew that it had fallen apart. And she must do all this hoping that John would change his mind, that he would return to her. It was a double handicap she operated under and the stakes were the rest of her life.

"Oh!" Alex exclaimed softly. He hunkered down a little and peered more intently through the window into the gathering dark.

Anne crouched on the couch, knees tucked under her, chin in

hand, elbow on the arm of the sofa. Staring off down the gloomy hall to the bedrooms, she envisioned her reunion with John: He could call (surely he would call), asking that they meet, and she would suggest the lily pond at the park at dusk.

"Oh!" repeated Alex. He was bidding for her attention.

Anne closed her eyes, drew breath. Be careful, she reminded herself. Don't appear distracted. He'll notice if you're not yourself. (He hadn't so far, or, if he had, he put it down to PMS or their failure to conceive a child. Something irritatingly condescending like that. His obtuseness had been a relief to Anne, but it also infuriated her. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he see what was before his eyes?) "What is it, Alex?" she asked, feigning marginal interest. "Is it the police?"

"No," replied Alex. "By God! There he is, Annie, and right on time."

"Who?" asked Anne.

"The Lover of Thornton Avenue," Alex replied, his soft voice betraying his excitement. He was a big man to have such a light voice. "Here. Come look."

"I'm tired," Anne protested.

"You're always tired," Alex observed. "You should get your iron checked. Come on, Annie. Just for a minute. This is interesting."

Sighing, Anne unfolded herself and, rising from the couch, crossed to the window.

"See that man over there?" asked Alex, stepping to one side so that she could see. He pointed over her shoulder to a man standing by the postal box on the corner of Thornton and Grosvenor Streets. The light was too dim for her to be able to determine much about him, but he looked to be in his late thirties or early forties. He was of medium height and weight. His hair was a little sparse. He looked nervous. He kept shifting his weight from foot to foot, then craned his head to look down the street towards Beaton, then checked his watch. He looked like a man waiting for a bus, but there was no bus stop at Thornton and Grosvenor. "That's the man Lana told me about," Alex told Anne. "I'm sure of it."

"What man?" asked Anne.

"A number of the neighbours have noticed him," Alex told her.

"Lana was telling me on that Canada Day do of theirs. Apparently this has been going on for months, probably since before daylight savings time, only no one noticed until it became lighter. He meets someone."

"Who?" Anne asked.

"A woman," Alex replied. "A woman drives up in a car. It's always at about this time of night. She drives up and parks and he gets in and they make love."

Anne felt suddenly very weak. They make love? she thought. "How . . . how do you know?" she managed to ask.

"They get into the back seat. It's a big American car apparently, tinted windows . . . and they just disappear for fifteen minutes or so. I don't think anyone's tried to look in or anything. What else would they do? Let's watch and see if she comes."

"Oh, Alex, no!" cried Anne, pulling away. She felt ill all of a sudden, woozy, as if she might faint or vomit.

"What's the matter?" Alex asked.

"I don't know," said Anne. "Please, it's private. Their business. We shouldn't be looking on."

"You've gotten pretty high-minded all of a sudden!" Alex joshed her.

"It's not a question of being high-minded!" Anne insisted. Tears started to her eyes. (Surely John would have called by now, she thought wildly, written: "I can't go on without you. Can we meet?" He didn't get on with his wife. If guilt hadn't made him assiduous, he would have left her by now. Surely one month without the guilt would be enough Nearly a month had passed, and no word from him yet. She couldn't believe it. She couldn't stand it. She had counted on his inconstancy.)

But Alex had taken her by the shoulders and was peering into her face. "Your eyes are all swollen," he said. "It's your hay fever acting up again, isn't it? Why didn't you say anything? I'm going to have to ask the Baxters to pull that goldenrod. There's no reason why you should have to suffer because they're lazy gardeners."

Anne lowered her eyes so that she wouldn't have to meet his.

"Would you? I'd appreciate that. Sarah is always so snippy to me when I ask. I'll . . . I'll just go rinse them now," she murmured and, twisting out of his grasp, she headed towards the bathroom where she could

weep, with open mouth, into a pile of folded towels.

Alex watched his wife's fragile back as she retreated down the hall, noted the way she steadied herself with fingers trailed against the wall. She turned into the bathroom, shut the door behind her. He heard the sound of taps turning, running water.

He wondered what had happened between them. She seemed to move within a force-field he could not penetrate. When he touched her, he could feel her flinch, feel all her muscles tighten. When he made love to her in all the old ways he thought she liked, he was certain he sometimes felt her lips move against his flesh in a peculiar way. It was as though they were forming words, a word, a name perhaps, but his skin could not read lips. What soundless thing was she saying to his skin? Or was she disappearing inside herself? Or was it him?

He made a mental note to speak to Gene Baxter about the goldenrod, knowing full well that he had no intention of doing so. He needed a reason why she wept. Sighing, leaden in his gut, feeling old though not yet forty and wondering: was it stress at the office? He had been feeling some lately. Alex turned back towards the window and his surveillance of the anxious, expectant lover.

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Some days later, Alex sat on the front porch with a neighbour of theirs, Shirley. Shirley had just been finishing up her run when Alex called across the lawn to her and asked her up for a beer. He had put on weight lately, more than even a big, broad-shouldered frame like his could accommodate gracefully. It was his desk-bound job. His age. He thought he might take up jogging. How about the proper shoes? he wanted to know. Were they as important as everybody seemed to think?

"Vital," Shirley told him. "Otherwise, your joints go all to hell." Deep into her second Blue Lite, Shirley sat next to Alex — closer perhaps than strictly necessary, her heavy, white legs crossed, her feet up on the porch railing. A big-boned blowsy girl in her late twenties, an ultrasound technician, Shirley was a single woman who did not give the appearance of being desperate. For this reason she had always

seemed somewhat foreign to Anne. "What are you doing?" she asked Anne now, including her in the conversation out of politeness.

Anne sat at the far end of the porch, huddled over a notebook. "Making out the grocery list," she lied.

She had spent the hour before dinner down in the basement ironing clothes she had forgotten she owned. Some of them had lain in the ironing basket for two years. As she sprayed and starched and leaned with all her weight into the iron, she wept until her throat was raw, until her face felt as stiff as the shirtfronts she starched. Really, she told herself at last, there was no way she could go on like this. She had to do something for herself. He wasn't coming back. She must start to let go. She decided to make a list of John's bad and good points. Surely the bad points would outweigh the good points and she would realize that she was better off without him.

"I thought you went to the store yesterday," said Alex.

"For milk. That was all," she prevaricated.

Too fond of sushi, she wrote. Anne had never been a great fan of raw fish.

Shirley leaned closer to Alex and touched him lightly on the arm. "There he is," she said softly, as the Lover of Thornton Avenue turned the corner and came walking up the sidewalk in their direction.

Alex consulted his watch. He nodded confirmation to Shirley. "Right on time," he said.

Tooth enamel ridiculously sensitive, Anne wrote of John. The man couldn't drink champagne. What sort of lover was that? A lot of good he'd do a girl in Paris! Not that they were likely to go to Paris all that often. Not on John's salary. That was another thing. *Salary*, she wrote down.

"Look, Anne," Shirley hissed. "It's the Lover of Thornton Avenue!"

A good lover: Anne had written the words before she thought them. Then, catching her breath, she laid the pen down and pressed her fingers hard against her temples. A memory of making love to John — the long, open-mouthed kisses, how his mouth had sought her breasts, the hands that steered her hips by their bones.

"What's the matter, Annie?" Alex asked.

"Headache," Anne breathed.

"You've been having a lot of headaches," observed Alex. His face

wore an expression of anxious concern. Irritatingly anxious. "Shall I get you some aspirin?" he asked, half-starting from his seat.

"Stay where you are," she said brusquely. She wouldn't allow him to be kind to her. She couldn't bear it. "It will pass." Get a grip on yourself, she advised herself. Be practical. Realistic. In real life people don't live in the bedroom.

No prospects, she wrote emphatically. She underlined *prospects* twice. Once she had hoped John might carry her off on a white charger. As if Alex — poor Alex — were some kind of dragon. She smiled ironically, rubbed her forehead. In truth she felt betrayed. John drove a second-hand Hyundai, and that was not even paid for.

"Now there's the car. I can just make out the woman's head," Alex was telling Shirley. "Is she blonde or brunette?"

"Nobody's ever gotten close enough to see," replied Shirley.

"She must be very beautiful," said Alex. His voice sounded wistful. His eyes strayed to Anne, who was beautiful in a willowy way.

"Perhaps she's very ordinary looking," countered Shirley somewhat sharply.

"No, no," Alex protested. "She must be beautiful. How else can you explain such devotion?"

"I tell you what!" announced Shirley. She started from her chair. "I'll take a jog past the car and look in."

Anne looked up from her list in horror. "Oh, no," she protested. "Don't do that."

"Why not?" asked Shirley.

"You've had two beers," said Anne.

"I'm not driving, Anne," Shirley pointed out.

"But it's their time!" As soon as she spoke, she wished she could take back the words.

"What do you mean by that, Annie?" Alex asked.

"I mean . . . it's the only time they have," Anne tried to explain.

"They meet every other night, Anne. Or just about," Shirley pointed out.

"But he could be planning to leave her," Anne said in alarm. "Or her husband might find out she's meeting him. Time might be running out for them. The whole affair might be about to disintegrate. To blow up in their faces. You don't know. It's wrong to intrude."

"I'm not going to intrude," Shirley said, sounding a little short. Anne's scruples irritated her. "I'm just going to jog by the car. It's parked on the street, Anne. It's our street." She headed down the porch steps.

Anne sagged in her chair.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" Alex asked her.

"Shirley's so nosy!" Anne complained.

"She's not nosy," Alex disagreed. "She's interested. So am I. It's interesting. Come on, Annie," he tried to cajole her. "Nobody gets hurt."

"That's where you're wrong," insisted Anne, bending over her notebook again. "They do get hurt."

He doesn't love me, she wrote. For a moment she stared at the words, then, unable to bear what they said to her, she slammed shut the notebook, and stood.

"They get very, very hurt!" she cried.

"I don't understand!" Alex called after her as she went into the house. "Annie, what's wrong?"

She pretended not to hear him.

A few moments later Shirley came pounding up the porch steps. Anne heard her speak to Alex from the kitchen where she was unloading the dishwasher: "Well?" she asked, panting.

"Well, what?" asked Alex. He sounded glum.

"Aren't you going to ask me what she looks like?" Shirley demanded.

"What does she look like?" Alex asked.

"I couldn't tell," Shirley laughed. "I could only see her bum. Could I have another beer, Alex? You've got your fridge set just right. Where'd Anne get to?"

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Lana and Bob, who lived next door to Shirley, invited Anne and Alex and Shirley over for a barbecue. Bob was a gourmet cook. He had made Thai peanut sauce. While he tended to the chicken on the grill, wearing a big apron and a chef's hat, Alex, Lana and Shirley hung over the back fence, watched the Lover of Thornton Avenue at his

post, comparing notes, composing possible scenarios.

"He's always there at the dot of seven-thirty," observed Alex. "Never a moment late. You could practically set your watch by him. And he always looks so nervous, as though he's afraid she won't show up."

"She's not so punctual," Lana observed. "She's been up to an half an hour late sometimes."

"I think it's easier for him to get away than it is for her," Shirley defended the unknown woman. "I think he says, 'I'm taking my evening constitutional. Be back soon,' or something. I think she has to come up with a different excuse each time."

Anne stood by the kitchen door, watching an earwig devour the star-shaped blue flower of a clematis. She was no good in social situations any more. She felt at a remove, as if she were watching a movie in which she played only a small part, possibly a foreign-language film. Now, listening to Shirley, she had to laugh when she thought of her own poor excuses — girls' night out with nonexistent girls, then a course offered by the P.U.C. in upholstery, paid for but never attended. That had been a stroke of genius — John's idea. John.

Lana caught her laugh and misinterpreted it. "Oh, come on, Anne," she chided her. She was a soft little woman, fluffy, tallow-coloured hair, blue-veined white flesh crammed into a skimpy halter and short shorts. "You can't pretend you don't find the whole thing just terribly romantic!"

But Anne just lifted her chin, shook her head. She knew she was being rude. She couldn't help it. Her life had become something through which she walked; time something she killed.

"Anne's not very interested for some reason," Alex stepped in quickly, embarrassed by her silence, apologizing for her.

"I just don't think it's any of our business," she muttered.

"Well, Annie, it is our street," Bob pointed out.

Anne shrugged angrily. She and John had made love in cheap motels or, when the weather became warmer, like teenagers in public parks — Gibbons, Spring Bank down by the pump house. "I can't see how you can condone this kind of behaviour," she said. "Why doesn't somebody complain?" She turned to Lana. "Your kids play outside after dinner, Lana. Aren't you afraid they might look in the car?"

"Oh, no, Anne," Lana reassured her. "We've asked them not to, and too bad for them if they do."

"Have some fellow feeling," Alex urged her gently. "Maybe they have no other place to go."

This was more than Anne could endure. How dare he be so compassionate? He wouldn't be if he knew the truth about her. She didn't feel guilty. She felt rage at his stupidity, at the blindness of his trust. "And why not?" she demanded heatedly. "Why don't they have some place else to go? Because they're probably married, or one of them is at any rate. Somebody's cheating on somebody else out there every other night on our street, but that doesn't seem to bother anybody here! How would you feel if it were Bob who was so 'devoted,' Lana?" She pushed it to its limit. "Or if it was me driving that car, Alex?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Anne," said Alex.

"But what if it was?" she cried.

For a moment nobody said anything. Then, "Your Honda Civic is much too small," Lana laughed nervously.

"If I were Philippe Rushton, I might observe that the Japanese would build bigger cars if they had a more active sex life," observed Bob too heartily. "Do you think car size reflects penis size?" Spearing a chicken breast with his long barbecue fork, he flipped it over, splattering fat which hissed onto the glowing coals below. Flame shot up in spears.

Anne and Alex remained where they were for a moment, their eyes locked. Then Anne turned abruptly on her heel and went into the house. She went into the bathroom off the kitchen and sat down on the toilet. For a moment she buried her face in her hands. Then, looking up again, she removed the tightly folded sheet of notepaper from inside her bra. It was the list of John's good and bad points she had begun some days earlier.

Unadventurous. Sticks with what he knows. Basically fearful, she read. Hard to talk to. Derails conversation. Finds intimacy hard.

She stopped.

What was the use of going on? She knew it off by heart. He was useless. Worse than useless. Gone. For that little time he had been hers, and now he was no longer. He would never be again. It is over, Anne. Over. She refolded the list, replaced it in her bra. What would

happen to her now? What in heaven's name would she do? How on earth could she continue living with Alex after this, haunting her former life like a ghost, unable to speak, unable to bridge the gap she had created? Would it ever close?

When she returned to the patio, they were all standing along the fence, Bob included, pointing to the street and the big American car which had just pulled up alongside the curb. Unnoticed, she crossed the patio to the bar cart, poured herself a gin and tonic and sank down onto a lawn chair. Perhaps not entirely unnoticed, she reflected, because she thought she had seen Alex shiver in the twilight, as though he had experienced a sudden chill on her passing.

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One night in August the United Church two blocks down held a White Elephant Sale. It was an annual event. All the neighbours went. Alex went too. He liked to buy gardening tools secondhand. Anne complained of the heat. She didn't feel well. There was nothing she wanted to buy. She stayed home, sat on the porch and flipped through a women's magazine.

At dusk the Lover of Thornton Avenue wandered up the sidewalk to his accustomed spot. Some time later the big American car drove up. Anne did not want to sit there while they were making love in the car. She laid her magazine down on the floor next to the chair and was just standing to leave when the door to the car opened and a woman got out.

Anne stood very still.

The woman was shorter than the man. She had shoulder-length brown hair. She wore a white dress which shone in the dim light. She seemed slim. Without saying a word or perhaps just whispering his name, she held out her arms to the man and drew him to her.

Anne caught onto the back of a chair, clung to it. Don't close your eyes, she thought. If illicit lovers kiss with their eyes closed, they grow to enormous size and can be seen for miles around.

The couple closed their eyes, kissed. They swelled in size. The woman's dress beat white against the smoke-coloured twilight like a pale heart. Enormous. They were all her eyes could hold.

Quickly she averted her gaze, looked down, away, according them the invisibility the world accords lovers. Pulling away from one another, glancing up, they might see her on her porch. She knew that, for them, if she did not seem to notice, then she did not exist, just as the waitresses at the bar where she and John used to meet and kiss and kiss had not existed for them. When she looked up again, they were gone. They had disappeared into the car.

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A week later, the big American car didn't show up. The Lover of Thornton Avenue waited and waited. He waited for two hours. The neighbours kept an eye on him. They suffered for him. "Maybe she's sick," Shirley suggested.

Two nights later, the same scene repeated itself. The neighbours felt dreadful.

"Shouldn't one of us go out? Say something to the poor man?" Lana wanted to know.

But the rest of them urged her to stay away. "It would embarrass him to know he's been seen," they argued.

Later, after everyone had gone inside, Anne stole out to the porch. Alex was in the kitchen, making potato salad. They were going to a potluck — someone in his office who had just had a baby. Anne could see that the Lover was weeping silently. His tears shone silvery in the gloom.

At first she had been glad when the woman in the car stood up the Lover of Thornton Avenue. She was glad that it was the man who had been hurt, not the woman. And she had thought Alex and the neighbours fools for the sympathy they lavished on the unknown Lover. Worse. Hypocrites. Now she was not so sure.

She wanted to go down the steps, to cross the lawn and then the street where the lover stood weeping. In her mind's eye she saw herself taking him in her arms and holding him to her breast and murmuring into his thinning hair, "It's all right. I know what you're going through. I've been through it myself. Believe me, you don't go unseen. You're immense, larger than life. People see you, but they won't be hard on you. There's forgiveness for you."

The man hung his head and turned to leave. He started back down the street in the direction in which he had come. He walked slowly as though he had nowhere to return to, nowhere to go.

Suddenly Anne started down the steps after him and across the lawn, almost running.

"Anne!"

She stopped, turned around.

Alex stood in the door, half hidden by the screen. His arms cradled an oversized crockery bowl covered tightly with plastic wrap — it shone bone white in the gloom. "Anne," Alex said. "We should leave now." He paused, then stepped out onto the porch and set the bowl down on a green wicker chair. He asked hesitantly, "Where . . . where were you going just now?"

"I don't know," Anne told him truthfully. Then, "Nowhere I suppose." She blinked up at him. In his navy blue polo and white trousers he looked big, scrubbed and pink, like a large, bearded baby. Clean and fleshy. Guileless.

"Your feet are bare," he pointed out.

Anne looked down at her feet, then wiggled her toes in the damp grass. "So they are!" she acknowledged.

"You wouldn't get far in bare feet." He sounded hopeful.

"I suppose not," she agreed.

"Then . . . will you come with me now?" he asked. Tentatively he extended his hand. As tentatively she took it, her fingers light and feverish warm in his heavy, damp ones.

"For now," she thought and allowed herself to be led up the porch steps. Her bare feet left a wet mark, a stain flecked with scraps of grass, on the cool, grey painted steps.