

## LOVE BY THE MONTH

February.

How long should 'romantic love' last? There isn't an answer. There can't be one. But to pose the question on Valentine's Night is not unreasonable. I toy with the idea of asking Guy but, naturally, I don't.

Guy and I are sitting at my usual table — the table Signor Colangelo always reserves for me — in the *Ponte Vecchio* in Camden Town. The table is beneath an antique wine rack at the back of the restaurant and is generally set a little apart. Guy isn't happy with it.

—Too dark, too tucked away, he says. Let's see if we can move.

Signor Colangelo explains, with great regret, that we can't.

—All our tables are booked on Valentine's Night, he says. Always on Valentine's Night.

Guy, bending his head over the wine list, tries to disguise his displeasure.

—So, Lily, he says, looking up and around. This is where you come when I'm away.

—Yes, Guy, I say. This is where I come.

—A modest little eatery, isn't it?

—Yes, Guy. As you say. A modest little eatery.

I watch the other couples in the restaurant. They are looking into each other's eyes, leaning forward, listening, whispering sweet intimacies. On Valentine's Night, Signor Colangelo fits in extra tables wherever he can. If I wished, I could overhear the

couple at the table next to ours. The woman is wearing a cream silk shirt and silvery jewellery that dances in the candlelight.

Guy is studying the menu. Scowling slightly, running his finger rapidly down the page. The menu doesn't change. I know it by heart but I still like to hold it in my hands. To picture the dishes. To savour their names. To let them take shape in my imagination.

—I'll have the *carpaccio* and the *pollo alla cacciatore*, says Guy. And Lily will have *bruschetta* followed by *vitello limone*. That's right, isn't it, Lily?

Signor Colangelo looks at me. I nod. He nods back. Signor Colangelo and I understand one another.

—And a bottle of your *Chianti Classico Reserva*, says Guy.

—Certainly, Signor. Thank you, Signora.

There was a time when Guy liked watching me studying the menu. He would sit and smile and tell me how endearing he found my 'indecision'. I might have tried to explain the pleasures of postponement but this isn't something he would have understood. Later, he began to find my 'indecision' less endearing and I sensed it would soon become an irritation. That is why, whenever we eat out together, Guy orders for me.

He is telling me about his recent business trip to Beijing. Or Shanghai. Or somewhere else.

—Mr Leung strikes me as a man I can do business with, says Guy. And Joy Hills Pharmaceuticals is a first rate operation. No doubt about that. No doubt at all.

Guy pauses momentarily to allow his doubts to disperse.

—You remember Mr Ng? he says. I must have told you about Mr Ng. Did I tell you that 'Ng' means 'five' in Cantonese? Didn't I? Well, it does. Anyway, the word is that Mr Five's in gaol. Whether it's for trying to bribe the wrong people or for not bribing the right people, no one seems to know ...

Guy has been a frequent visitor to China for many years. As he has said on many occasions, China is the future. But unhappily, for Guy, the tangle of bribery, nepotism

and corruption in which he has found himself enmeshed has meant that China is not yet the present.

—It's been a long old voyage, he says, but with a fair wind behind us, we'll get there in the end. Yes, Lily, we'll get there in the end.

—Yes, Guy, I say. I'm sure you will.

He rubs the bridge of his nose, scratches his neck, pulls his ear-lobe. He is wondering when the fair wind will start blowing ...

—The Year of the Dragon.

It takes me a moment to realise that Guy's remark is addressed to the couple at the table next to ours.

—I'm sorry, he says. I couldn't help overhearing your question. I was in Guangzhou over Chinese New Year. That's how I know. This year's the Year of the Dragon. Last year was the Year of the Rabbit.

When we first met, I was awed by Guy's willingness to talk to strangers. I still admire his sociability although it does occasionally embarrass me. This evening,

however, it's not a problem. The couple at the next table appear to welcome his intervention.

—I'm Guy, he says, and this is Lily.

—Lillian, I say.

—Hello, Lily, says the woman. I'm Miranda and this is Sam.

—Samuel, he says, and smiles.

He has a shy, kind smile and sea-blue eyes.

— Guangzhou? says Miranda.

—Canton as we used to know it, says Guy. Confusing when they change the names, isn't it?

—Isn't it? Peking's become Beijing and Shanghai ... What's Shanghai become?

—Shanghai's still Shanghai.

Signor Colangelo brings Guy his *carpaccio*. He hasn't noticed that Signor Colangelo has brought me *melanzane alla parmigiana* which is what I always have at the Ponte Vecchio.

—Why don't we move our tables together? says Guy. Better than shouting across the gap.

—Yes, says Miranda. Why don't we?

And we do.

—Can I tell you a remarkable fact, says Guy.

—Please do, says Miranda. I've always been fascinated by China.

—Guangzhou is twinned with Bristol.

—Oh.

—Isn't that extraordinary?

—Yes, says Miranda. Extraordinary. I'd love to see the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Terracotta Army, Guilin. Now tell me, Guy. Are you a Dragon?

—I should know this, shouldn't I, says Guy. I think I may be a Rat or possibly a Rooster. I know I'm a Taurus if that's any help.

—A Taurus? Yes, I can see that, says Miranda. I'm a ... What am I, Sam? Sam's very knowledgeable about the Zodiac.

Samuel smiles. It's a patient smile. The question has been asked before and will be asked again.

—You're a Leo, Miranda, he says.

—That's right, says Miranda. I'm a Leo. And you're a Virgo, aren't you, Sam? What about Lily? What would you say she is?

Samuel looks at me. A moment caught in the air.

—Lily's an Aries, aren't you, Lily? says Guy.

—Lillian is a Pisces, says Samuel.

—Is she? says Miranda. Are you?

—Yes, I say. I am.

It's been a pleasant evening. Guy and Miranda have done most of the talking while Samuel and I have sat and listened which I don't think either of us has minded.

Signor Colangelo brings us the bill and our coats.

—Do you know what we should do? says Miranda. We should meet again, the four of us. We should, shouldn't we? Why don't we?

—Why not? says Guy. I do a fair bit of travelling, of course, but I return to base from time to time, don't I, Lily? Let me give you my business card.

And he does.

March.

Why do we fall in love? Another impossible question but one I find myself asking in the taxi going home from the theatre.

Guy has taken me to see *A Doll's House* — not perhaps the best choice of play to celebrate our wedding anniversary. It may have been that Guy confused it with *Guys and Dolls*. It didn't matter much. Exhausted after another business trip, Guy fell asleep the moment the curtain rose,. He always falls asleep in the theatre. In concerts, too. Guy

tells me that he wants to share my interests, which is sweet of him, although it might be better if he let me go to the theatre on my own.

Guy has always been a loving husband. During our courtship — a quaint word, I know, but it's the only one I can find to describe his campaign of flowers and chocolates, perfume and verse — Guy overwhelmed me. I don't know what he saw in me. I still don't. He may not have known himself. But he was always so confident that he'd fallen in love that I was swept away by his certainty. We were married before I knew what was happening. I shouldn't regret it. Guy is a kind and generous man. He works hard and

provides us with everything we need. But the question I sometimes ask myself is whether or not Guy ever gave me space to fall in love with him?

April.

Miranda telephones.

—Is that Millie?

—It's Lillian, I say.

—Lily? she says. Oh, yes. Of course. We met at that little restaurant in Camden Town on Valentine's Night.

I am pathetically pleased to hear from her. Guy is away again and I'm lonely.

—I know it's shockingly short notice, says Miranda, but Sam and I were wondering if you'd like to come to dinner this weekend.

—I'd love to come, I say, but it will only be me, I'm afraid. Guy's away.

—Oh, dear, says Miranda. What a pity.

There's a conversation at the other end of the line.

—Sam is suggesting you come on your own, says Miranda, but I've told him I'm sure you'd prefer to wait until Guy's home.

Without Guy it seems I don't exist.

Miranda and I fix a date in May. It's several weeks away but the days will pass.

May.

Miranda and Samuel live in a small, over-furnished flat in Belsize Park. There are too many tables and chairs, too many curtains and cushions, too many ornaments and trinkets. It feels as if everything is fighting for breath.

Guy notices a set of framed photographs on top of the television.

—I see you're a skier, he says.

—I try to go every year if I can, says Miranda. That's me at Méribel. And Val d'Isère. That's Chamonix. I'd spend the whole winter skiing if I could.

—We generally go to Zermatt, don't we, Lily? Lily's not especially keen on skiing but there are some wonderful walking trails. We've tried Whistler and Aspen ...

—Courchevel is divine, and so, of course, is Verbier ...

As before, Guy and Miranda talk while Samuel and I sit and listen. A time comes, however, when I feel that Samuel and I should do more than smile at each other. My



eyes have been drawn to two delicate paintings — a landscape and a portrait — hanging in a corner. I ask Samuel who painted them.

—I did, he says.

—You're a painter?

—I'm a teacher. I teach art.

Miranda has overheard us.

—It's a terrible waste of his talent, she says.

—I enjoy teaching ...

—I know you enjoy it, Sam, but ...

Miranda is about to say more but stops herself. It's clear this is a conversation she and Samuel have often had before.

I stand up and go to look at the paintings in the corner. After a moment, Samuel joins me.

—They're lovely, I say.

—Thank you, says Samuel. But I didn't stop in time.

—What do you mean?

—It's difficult to know when a painting's finished. I went on working on them when I should have stopped. It's a problem I have.

—Well, I like them, I say.

—You're very kind, says Samuel.

—I'm not being kind, I say.

—Cézanne never finished a painting, says Samuel. He went as far as he thought he could and then he abandoned it. Perhaps I should try to model myself on Cézanne?

—Perhaps you should.

The same kind smile

Miranda and Guy have been talking about tennis, a passion they both seem to share. It has been another pleasant evening.

June.

Guy hasn't been travelling this month but I'm as lonely as ever. It's my fault. I needn't be here on my own. Guy had tickets for Wimbledon and asked me if I'd like to go with him.

—I know Wimbledon isn't really your thing, Lily, but ...

I thanked him but, as Guy knows, sport bores me.

In the event, it's been raining and there has been no play. Guy calls me late in the afternoon to say that he's met a business colleague and will be taking him to dinner. He doesn't invite me to join them.

July.

Miranda and Samuel come to dinner in Highgate.

—The 'return match,' says Miranda.

—What? says Guy. Oh, I see what you mean.

Miranda looks stunning. She is wearing a turquoise shirt and gold earrings and is as animated as ever. Guy seems strangely subdued. Are his business trips catching up with him? After dinner Guy gives Miranda 'a tour of the estate' as he put it. She has already said how much she adores the house.

—I love what you've done with your home, Lily, she says.

The truth is I've done nothing. When we moved here from Camden Town, Guy insisted on using an interior decorator. Jonathan talked to Guy about Sudbury Yellow and Porphyry Pink and Elephant's Breath but scarcely spoke to me at all.

Guy and Miranda are gone for some time and Samuel and I have an interval of quiet together. He needs a little coaxing but soon he's talking about teaching and art and

how, for him, one feeds the other. He is, it seems, not only a painter but a sculptor, too.

When he speaks, he smiles and frowns at the same time which I find very engaging.

—Were any of your sculptures on display in your flat? I say. I didn't notice any.

—No, he says. I keep them in a lock-up. Miranda doesn't care much for my sculptures.

At one point — I'm not sure when — I tell Samuel that he has the eyes of an artist. I don't know what I mean by this and it makes him shy. But it also seems to please him.

When Miranda and Guy return, they seem excited. Miranda says she's had a brilliant idea. Every August, she and Sam take a gîte in the Lot for three weeks.

—Why don't you and Guy join us? she says.

Guy seems to have agreed to her suggestion which surprises me. He travels so much on business, he says, that — except for skiing — he generally prefers to take his holidays in England. It will be good to go abroad again although I am a little anxious about going on holiday with people we barely know.

August.

What have we done? I am very confused.

We established from the start that each of us would do what we wanted and feel under no obligation to do anything together. I had my books, Samuel had his paints and brushes and Guy and Miranda had both brought tennis racquets. The tennis court, unfortunately, was overgrown with weeds and brambles, but Guy found two old bicycles in an outhouse and spent the morning fixing them. In the afternoon he asked who would

like to join him on a cycling expedition. I was reading and Samuel was painting but Miranda said she'd be happy to come.

This became the pattern of our days. I read. Samuel painted. And Miranda and Guy rode off on their bicycles. One morning Samuel asked very shyly if he could paint me. I said I would be delighted.

—You don't mind my asking? he said.

Why should I mind? There's something intoxicating about being studied intently hour after hour. The only disappointment was that Samuel was unwilling to show me what he'd painted.

—I don't have you right yet, he said.

Finally, half-way through the second week, he let me see the picture he'd been working on. It was lovely. Exquisite, in fact. But it wasn't a good likeness. The woman he had painted was very beautiful but she wasn't me. When he asked what I thought, I burst into tears. I tried to explain why and Samuel was very sweet and gentle. Should I be ashamed to admit that we ended up in bed? If I should, I'm not. It seemed so natural. We went to bed together the next day, too, and the day after that. It was heavenly but we both felt guilty. Hurting Guy and Miranda wasn't what either of us wanted to do. We resolved to make a full confession when they came back from their bicycle ride.

Their reaction was unexpected. They laughed. For several minutes, they couldn't stop. Then Guy explained that he and Miranda had been having an affair for weeks. It started, it seems, when he took her to Wimbledon.

—Now it's out in the open, said Miranda, we should all be mature about it. Adult, grown up, pragmatic.

Guy nodded in agreement. Samuel studied the floor. I'm not sure what I felt.

That night — and for the rest of the holiday — we changed our sleeping arrangements. Miranda moved in with Guy and I joined Samuel. There were moments of awkwardness, of course. Saying goodnight and going to bed. Passing Guy or Miranda on

the way the bathroom. Waking in the morning and remembering where I was. But all in all for some reason it seemed easier in France than it would have been in England.

At the end of the holiday, it was odd going back to Guy's bedroom to fetch my suitcase. And odder still to be saying goodbye to Samuel and Miranda, watching them drive away, and then driving home to Highgate with Guy.

Is this a comedy or a tragedy or a silly farce? It's difficult to tell. As I say, I'm very confused.

September.

On the face of it, life has returned to normal. Guy — when he's here — is as kind as ever. He's a good man and I love him. Love, after all, describes a multitude of affections. We haven't talked about Miranda or Samuel. I haven't raised the subject and neither has he. It's as if France never happened. Perhaps in some way it didn't.

I long for Samuel to call me but I know this is too much to ask. He's shy and it's not in his nature. This is something I will have to do myself. When I feel brave enough, that is.

October.

The telephone rings. For no reason at all I think it will be Samuel. It isn't.

—Lily? Can you hear me? I'm at the airport. I took an earlier flight.

—Guy?

—I've been thinking on the plane. Turning things over in my mind. I'm going over to Belsize Park. It's time to sort it all out. Don't you agree?

—It's almost midnight, Guy. Won't they be in bed?

—I'll call you later, Lily. Don't wait up for me.

November.

What attracts us to one another? I can see why Guy likes Miranda and why she is attracted to him. They are 'doing' people; not people who dream. I still can't say what

Guy saw in me. I know that opposites are supposed to attract but with Guy I felt I was diminishing. With Samuel I know I am growing again.

Miranda organised everything. So practical, so capable. She and most of her furniture moved to Highgate, and Samuel and I now live in Belsize Park. I don't want to analyse it very much. I feel our contentment is best left undisturbed. But I've become a different 'me' and the me I've become is much happier than the me I was before.

December.

Samuel and I are spending Christmas on our own. Samuel paints, I read, we listen to music. We are finding that — for now at least — we need no one else.

January.

Miranda calls.

—I've been speaking to Guy, she says. We wondered if it wouldn't be fun to book the same two tables together for Valentine's Night.

The idea appals me but I don't know what to say.

— I should probably call them right away, says Miranda. Shall I do that, Lily?

I seem to have agreed to her suggestion but I don't know how.

When I tell Samuel, he's furious. Too angry to allow himself to speak. I have never seen him angry before. I'm angry, too, but only with myself. We don't shout. We stand and glare at one other. Then Samuel leaves the flat. Will he come back? Is this the end? Has he gone for good? Should I walk the streets of Belsize Park to try to find him? I don't. Instead I wait and try not to panic. An hour later he's home. Our quarrel is over

and what I think has surprised us both is the relief we feel. We have had our first row and we have survived.

The next morning I telephone Miranda to tell her we have changed our minds. Not Valentine's Night. Another time perhaps? Maybe March or April or May or ... ?

Miranda agrees immediately.

—It was a silly whim, she says. That's what I told Guy last night. Guy's in Shenzhen by the way. A silly whim which I regretted right away. I've already cancelled the booking, in fact ...

I'm not sure if I believe her but it's unimportant. Miranda may be finding life lonely with Guy away. I should probably invite her to supper but I won't. This is our time — mine and Samuel's — and I intend to protect it for as long as I can.

On Valentine's Night, Guy will take Miranda somewhere smart in the Covent Garden. Samuel and I will sit at my old table in the Ponte Vecchio and Signor Colangelo will bring me *melanzane alla parmigiana*.

How long should 'romantic love' last? There isn't an answer. And, for the present, it's a question I feel no need to ask.