

MISCASTING

I wait for the telephone to ring, as it rings every night. Not as, at one time, it rang. No longer competing with the carriage clock on my mantelpiece softly striking ten. The telephone may ring at one o'clock, two o'clock, three in the morning. I sit and wait. Waiting is what I can do. Waiting is my obligation. Waiting is what I owe her.

I take out the playbill that I keep in the top drawer of my desk. I unfold it and smooth it out, as I do every night. The glossy paper has begun to crease and crack. The bright lettering has started to fade.

THE PARADISE PLAYERS

present

GARDEN HEARTS

by Fleur Loveday

29th to 31st May

(7.45pm)

I sit, the playbill lying flat in front of me, until the splintering of the night's silence. I listen to the telephone ringing. Ringing, ringing, ringing. When at last it stops, I take my glass of whisky and climb the stairs to my bedroom at the top of the house.

I am, I know, cast as the villain of this piece. A dark shadow brooding in the wings. Cold and unforgiving. It is a shallow judgement but not one I will contest. The judgement of others means nothing to me. It is my own – my judgement of myself – that I cannot set aside.

Molly and Gerry were what the world terms 'old friends' although I cannot recall feeling any affection for either of them. At one time I had succeeded in disentangling their business affairs. A messy process. Molly was duly grateful; Gerry was not. There are men – in my experience, it is mostly men – who cannot bring themselves to forgive anyone who has helped them. Molly, however, was insistent that I should spend a weekend with them in Cornwall. 'You must come to see us, Frederick. You really must.' The invitation was repeated frequently. Finally it was irksome to continue to refuse. Besides, I felt that such a visit need not be a hardship.

I held in my memory a bright childhood holiday by the sea. Rock-pools, a shrimping-net, a borrowed bucket and spade. My father had put me in the care of an elderly cousin of my mother's. Innocently I built sandcastles and guiltily ate ice-cream that normally would not have been allowed. No one had told me that my mother was dying. I was therefore unprepared for her death. My father considered me too young to attend the funeral. I returned to an empty house. A house that henceforth would always be empty. The nature and shape of our world had changed. My father and I found ourselves isolated, estranged from one another.

My stay with Molly and Gerry was disagreeable. Gerry was a surly host; Molly was ingratiating. Their financial difficulties had returned and they now wished to realise certain of their assets. They planned that I should buy their family house and be their financial saviour. The property was dark and damp and overpriced. I told them I had no interest in purchasing it. This upset them.

But the town itself I found agreeable. After a light lunch, I spent a pleasant afternoon walking along the cliffs, pausing to look out to sea, watching the waves heaving and rolling across one another and crashing onto the black rocks below. I felt a sense of ease. A rare contentment.

I decided I would buy an apartment in the town. Having once taken a decision, it is my way to act upon it. I see no purpose in prolonged deliberation or purposeless delay. I registered with the two local estate agents in the high street and told them that I would be ready to view their properties the following weekend. I thanked Molly and Gerry for their hospitality, took a taxi to the railway station and returned to London.

Later events compel me to remember my first meeting with Declan. His bumptious amiability and bogus enthusiasm irritated me, as did his coiffured hair and paisley tie. A lady's man, I thought. A mother's boy. I disliked him.

The properties he showed me did not match my specifications. My pointing this out did not seem to trouble him. Instead, he prattled on as we drove around the town. I made no pretence of listening and asked to be returned to my hotel.

Suzy talked, too. That is the nature of the estate agent's job. What she said was unimportant but I found myself happy to listen to her. The properties she showed me were, in fact, no more suitable than those I had seen with Declan. Until, that is, the last apartment which perfectly matched my needs. I knew it right away. She knew it, too, and was pleased for me. What enchanted me was the transparency of Suzy's delight.

What did we see in one another? A young woman, with her life ahead of her. A middle-aged bachelor, set in his ways. Each of us somehow oddly innocent and, as it must have appeared, comically mismatched. Ripe for pity and ridicule. But – as can be the way of things – we fell in love.

We had little in common. The City of London. The chatter and gossip of a seaside town. Our lives could not have been more different. This we knew and accepted. Our arrangement was practical. During the week, we lived apart and on Friday afternoons I took the train to Cornwall and Suzy met me at the station. On Sunday nights, I took the sleeper home but the weekends were ours. They were enough. We were happy.

We had routines which worked well. Suzy's weekday life was work and friends but every evening, she would go home and wait till ten o'clock. Savouring the waiting, she told me, before lifting the receiver to make her call. We didn't speak for long. We had little to say. Good night, my love. Sweet dreams. Sleep well. A nightly thread between us.

I had found what I never expected to find: a bright pool of happiness.

The Paradise Players' summer production is an annual event. A chance for the town's inhabitants to relax before the inflow of summer visitors.

Suzy auditioned, as she always did, and was cast as the leading lady.

—We rehearse on weekday evenings, she told me. Not at weekends. Not until the week before we open.

Did I object? No. Why should I?

—Your friends are involved in the show.

—My friends?

—Molly helps with costumes and Gerry is front of house.

Ah, yes. My friends.

At weekends, I hear her speak her lines.

"The telephone is ringing downstage left. Prudence enters upstage right ..."

—There's no need to read the stage directions, says Suzy. Just give me the cue.

"Prudence."

—Is that it?

—Yes.

—Damn. Oh, yes. I remember.

"Augustus! I thought I'd lost you. I thought you'd gone forever."

"I thought I'd gone forever, too."

"But here you are. My darling dandelion."

"Yes, here I am. My delicious delphinium. They embrace. Curtain."

—It's a silly play, isn't it, Freddie?

—'Garden Hearts'? A little silly. But you enjoy it, don't you?

—Yes, Freddie. I do.

Final rehearsals were to take place all weekend and every evening up until the first night. Was this all right? Suzy asked. Of course, I said. I told her I would keep out of her way and spend the weekend in London.

She telephoned on Monday night sounding strained.

—Everything's going wrong, she said. Absolutely everything.

I told her not to worry and assured her – in the way we offer such assurances – that all would be fine.

There was no call from Suzy on Tuesday night. I waited until one o'clock and then I went to bed and slept fitfully. The next morning she rang.

—We didn't finish rehearsing until two in the morning, she said. I'm so sorry, Freddie. So very sorry ...

I calmed her tears and told her not to worry.

—You know you can call me at any time of the day or night, I said. You know that, don't you, Suzy?

That Friday Suzy had arranged for Gerry to collect me from the railway station. He was in a strange mood. Almost as if he was pleased to see me.

—I have your ticket for tomorrow night, he said.

I told him I had not planned to see the play.

—Oh, but you must, said Gerry. Suzy is so good in it. They both are.

I rarely go to the theatre. I dislike the artifice. Plays seem to me to be little more than a tiresome set of postponements. Comedies end in confusion and then marriage. Tragedies end in silence and then death. They leave me with nothing.

The curtain falls. The play has finished. I am released from my duty and prepare to leave the theatre. But Molly sees me and tells me I must stay for the after-show party. Suzy will be expecting me there, she says. She will be devastated if I don't attend.

—You don't want to disappoint her, do you, Frederick?

I loathe the hollow jollity of such occasions. The cast of *Garden Hearts*, with their friends and supporters, crow and bellow at each other. A jostling throng, a screeching cacophony. I look about for Suzy. To kiss her goodnight. To tell her to enjoy herself. To say there is no need to hurry home and that I will see her in the morning when we will enjoy a leisurely breakfast and in the afternoon – if the weather permits it – walk along the cliffs to watch the waves before returning to the apartment where I will pack my bag and return to London.

But Suzy is nowhere to be found.

I step outside. A clear sky, a cool breeze. And there they are together. Prudence and Augustus. As in their play.

"Prudence."

"Augustus! I thought I'd lost you. I thought you'd gone forever."

"I thought I'd gone forever, too."

"But here you are. My darling dandelion."

"Yes, here I am. My delicious delphinium."

They embrace.

This is not my world. I should not be here. I know what I am witnessing: two actors rehearsing their lines one final time. I must leave them to release themselves from their parts. To set themselves free. But Suzy has seen me.

—Frederick!

I stop.

—Freddie!

I turn.

—It's really not what it seems, says Declan.

Not what it seems? The insolence of the boy.

— Frederick!

Suzy tries to release herself from him to come to me, but there is a moment – no more than a moment – when it seems that Declan is holding her back. Not to keep her for

himself, but to protect her from me. To protect her! I advance a pace and Declan steps back. Does he think I will hit him? This lady's man. This mother's boy. This coiffured clown. But in this instant I see myself. Comically tragic. Tragically comic. Ripe for pity and ridicule. I turn away ashamed.

I have no further need for my apartment and sell it satisfactorily through a London estate agent. I am told by Molly that Declan has moved away. I make it plain that this does not interest me.

The messages Molly leaves for me are the same. You must forgive her, Frederick. Suzy is drinking herself to death. She is falling apart. How can I explain to a woman like Molly – or to anyone else – that Suzy needs no forgiveness from me? That it is I who must forgive myself and that it is this I cannot do.

The telephone rings as it rings every night. When at last it stops, I take my glass of whisky and climb the stairs to my bedroom at the top of the house.