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and very funny. I loved this book'

SARAH WATERS

MIA FARLANE
**FOOTNOTES
TO SEX**

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Footnotes to Sex
by
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The Letter

May lay awake waiting for Jansen to get back. *Chère Francine*, she went through the letter in her head, *J'ai bien reçu ta lettre qui m'a fait très plaisir*. She was running out of days. If she had wanted to send the letter, she should have sent it that morning, on her way to work, or yesterday; last week, if she'd wanted Francine to get it on time. *How are you? And how was the conference in Canada? I am well, and still of course planning on doing the PhD . . .* Having wasted another day of her life, going over 'exam techniques' with nine-year-olds, May listened to the guitar-player upstairs practising his endless scales. She could always have put in her earplugs, but Jansen would be home in less than an hour, and that meant May couldn't get to sleep anyway. She was aware that at any moment there might be the clickety-clack of the door key, and then Jansen would appear, as she finally did, in her navy-blue uniform, a large leather bag in one hand, a quiet . . .

'Booboo?'

May pretended to be asleep. Jansen went towards the bathroom with a newspaper. She'd be ages.

'I'm awake.'

'Can I turn on the light?'

'No, I'm sleeping.'

'May, I'm sorry, but I need to iron my shirt for tomorrow.'

'Can't you wear that one again?'

Jansen clicked on the bedside lamp.

'Why can't you do it tomorrow?' May pulled herself up in bed.

'I could, but why don't we have a hot drink together. I really

need to unwind.’ Jansen set up the ironing board next to the kitchenette, and got the iron out from under the sink. ‘People are in such a rush out there! I was at the lights on my way to a pickup this morning, and there was this woman and I could see her. She was looking at me, and she was waving her arms around, she was going, “Come on! Come on!” I just glided slowly past her, and I thought, poor woman, if she’s getting so upset about five seconds! The other day I was pulling out from a park, and I’d looked both ways. I pulled out, and then suddenly BEEEEEEEEEP! I had a passenger in the car at the time. I said to him, “Boy! I didn’t even see that coming,” and he said, “He must’ve been booting it round the corner!”’ She held the iron under the tap, and filled the steam-chamber with water.

‘I didn’t send it, by the way,’ May told her.

‘Mm-hmm.’ Jansen plugged in the iron.

‘Does that mean you don’t want to talk about it?’ May said.

Jansen started ironing the collar. The iron wouldn’t be hot yet. There was no point. She rearranged the shirt, and started on the sleeves.

‘That iron’s not hot enough yet, is it?’

‘May, would you just leave me to iron my shirt? I can do it without your help.’

‘It’s not doing anything, is it though? You may as well be doing something else . . . while it heats up.’

Jansen began ironing the other sleeve.

‘You could be getting me a hot drink,’ May suggested.

‘Would you like a hot drink, May?’

‘Yes, please.’ May didn’t really want a hot drink, but Jansen liked to have one in the evening.

‘I’ll make you half a cup. You never finish it anyway. Shall we share one?’ Jansen got a cup out of the cupboard.

‘I’m just wondering whether I should send it to her at all.’

‘May, I’m really exhausted. I don’t feel like talking about Francine.’

'My PhD,' May corrected her.

'Or the PhD.'

'I've just got to decide whether I'm going to send it or not.'

'You don't have to decide tonight.'

May's throat hurt. 'Could I just tell you what I've put again?'

'I know what you've put.'

'I've changed it slightly.'

'I don't want to hear it, May.' (That was a definite 'no'. May waited in silence for her coffee.) 'They sent four of us out to the airport,' Jansen laughed as she crouched down to get the milk out of the fridge, 'but it turned out they only needed one car. So three of us had to go back to the bin to wait for another job.' She put the coffee on the bedside table, and went back to ironing again, a smile lingering.

'That's not funny. That's irritating, isn't it?' It was irritating the way Jansen laughed off annoying situations.

'It's what happens, May.' (Jansen would be wearing a jersey over that shirt. There was no point in ironing it. Or she could just iron the collar.) 'Then I got three lawyers,' Jansen went on, 'in a row: no tips, no tips, no tips. And that was my day.' She unplugged the iron, and stood it on the bench.

'How come four of you were sent out? Shouldn't it be more organized?'

'Yes.'

Jansen got into her pyjamas and came to bed. Then, as always, they had a long talk: one of Jansen's passengers had left her a pamphlet on Trees for London, she said, and she was wondering about giving people birch trees for Easter; you didn't actually get a tree, but you got a little card saying a tree had been planted for you. What did May think? May said she liked the idea and could she please just tell Jansen what she had added to the letter – only the addition – and Jansen said no, because that would get May thinking about it, and then she wouldn't sleep; and then May said she was thinking about it anyway, and Jansen said go on then, and

May did. She was so lucky really; who else had a wonderful Jansen in her life? Even if Jansen just crept into bed, she and May would often end up talking and talking late into the night, until perhaps Jansen would start drifting off, and May would say, as she did this evening: 'Are you going to sleep now? I hate going to sleep. It means it'll be morning when I wake up.' She was a realist; she liked to be prepared for all disasters, even if it meant she was grinding her teeth down to little stumps in the process. No wonder she needed so much sleep.

'You're so unromantic! How could I have got together with someone so unromantic?'

May wasn't a performer, that was for sure, but she did love Jansen.

'You're so wonderful, darling! I love you! I love you! I love you!' She kissed Jansen on the cheek, and put her earplugs in.

That night, May had another one of her rat dreams. In this one she had recently adopted a kitten. Unfortunately, she hadn't realized at the time that it was really a rat, and now she didn't know how to get rid of it (that might also be dangerous); she felt slightly sick about the whole thing, so she fed it, but decided it would be an outdoor cat, and would, with luck, get run over.

Successful People

It was last August that May had first met Francine. May went to Paris, she went there on her own, and stayed for two weeks at a cheap hotel in the nineteenth *arrondissement*; and during this time – it was, after all, the sole purpose of her trip – she met Francine.

‘Je t’admire et je t’admirerai toujours,’ May had told her. She could easily be frank in this role.

Francine made it clear she didn’t want anyone bringing flowers to her shrine, which only warmed May further to her. May was starry-eyed (the expression is exact).

She was twenty years older than May; it was just a crush, so Jansen wasn’t too concerned. ‘You admire her. Which is understandable.’

It was Jansen who had encouraged May to contact Francine in the first place:

‘But don’t waste her time. Make sure you’re prepared. Successful people haven’t got time to waste. Ring her with a short list of questions.’

Was that good advice? May made up her list of questions, a résumé of who she was, how she had Francine Brion’s telephone number, an introductory blurb to read off for the phone call; and then she went and spoke to Jansen again.

‘No, May! She won’t mind you ringing her. She’s probably a very approachable person. Say you’ve read her books, you loved them et cetera, you’re planning on coming to Paris, and you’d really like to meet her, because you’re going to do a PhD – you’re thinking maybe on her: she’ll be flattered.’

‘She doesn’t need flattering. She’s an intellectual.’

‘She’ll still be flattered! It’s always good to have someone do a thesis on you.’

‘If I *do* – I haven’t even got a supervisor yet – I’m not even sure why I’m thinking of doing it.’

‘You know why you’re doing it.’

‘Because although I’m not really capable of doing a PhD –’

‘You’re doing it because you’ve always wanted to do a PhD, May – and because you are capable of doing one.’

‘I don’t know that I *am* capable of doing one.’

‘In that case, why have we been living in a bedsit for the last seven months?’

‘Are you now saying you’re annoyed about living in a bedsit? You suggested we move into a bedsit, so I could save money. And now I’ve got to do a PhD; I’ve got no choice.’

‘I am not saying that. I would just like you to meet Francine Brio first, before you decide – in advance – that you’re incapable of doing a PhD.’

‘Brion.’

‘(Brion.) You were all excited before, when you found her address and telephone number on the Internet.’

‘I don’t really have a topic I know anything much about, and I don’t have a supervisor. All I’ve got is the money.’

‘That’s pretty impressive; hardly anyone saves up for going to university.’

‘It doesn’t require intelligence.’

‘And you’ve done lots and lots of reading.’

‘What have I read?’

‘I’m not even going to answer that – May, we’ve had this conversation before.’

- my name is May Woodlea.
- I’m writing a proposal for a PhD.
- on your views of gender in French lesbian literature.

- I know you have written a great deal on this subject.
- could I – at some time – ask you about your work?

Her introductory speech. May looked over her list; she was ready. Her thumping heart told her she was being brave. She picked up the receiver.

Francine Brion sounded pleased to get May's call:

'Have you read my latest book?' she asked.

'I've read it several times,' May said, breathless with excitement.

Francine Brion asked when exactly May was arriving.

May said, 'It could be this Saturday, in the afternoon.'

Francine suggested they meet on Saturday evening then, at La Fourmi Ailée.

And May booked her ticket.

That Saturday afternoon in Paris, May prepared herself in her hotel room: a beige T-shirt bought on the way to the hotel, from Camaïeu; brown trousers, from the same shop; emerald stud earrings to bring out her eyes; a discreet bit of wax on the tips of her hair, to tidy up what was supposed to have been a 'Louise Brooks' haircut; a just perceptible hint of *fond de teint*; the tiniest, most subtle bit of rouge; and a dab of Chanel 19. May drank some tap water from the basin in her room, and ate a few dates, before leaving.

Métro Belleville. She went down the steps, and sat on the stretch of low tiled benches, where she waited for the train with four or five silent others. Undemanding moments, she savoured them. Large advertisements opposite showed happy young women swooping out of Le Printemps wearing their latest purchases; hand-held children stood bedazzled outside the entrance to Le Parc Astérix.

A train arrived; 'ch-clunk', various doors were opened by people going in or out. May stepped into a carriage, and flipped down a *strapontin* seat away from the doors. The doors closed. She took out her book, *Les Démons de la solitude*, but couldn't concentrate; she looked at people in the carriage, and at more advertisements.

She put her book back. Rambuteau: one more stop. The thought of meeting Francine Brion was giving her stomach ache.

May walked across the river, past Notre-Dame with its tourists, her stomach ache for company, and arrived at La Fourmi Ailée. She was very early, but she looked around, just in case. Somewhere, quite possibly, hidden in the café, sat the author of *Le/les – féminin-s*. May found a waiter. Determinedly unselfconscious, she requested:

‘Une table pour deux.’

Did she want to order anything just yet? Or would she rather wait?

She’d wait. Thank you.

Now all she had to do was sit there. She had a corner seat by the entrance.

A tall woman with a brown leather hat came through the door – too young – and went to join a table of three. La Fourmi Ailée, May noted the name again on the paper menu in front of her. Fear tidal-waved from her stomach to the top of her throat. Francine was ‘probably really approachable’, and she had a warm voice on the phone, May reminded herself.

To her right, a family all had their eyes humbly lowered to their table. They must have been saying grace. A particularly religious family, May supposed, they were stopping, amidst all the noise, as a ‘solid family unit’, to thank God for their meal. It was a surprisingly long grace though. May looked again, and saw they had no food before them. They were studying the menu.

Finally, *she* entered the café. There was no question about it: Francine Brion; a neat package of a woman – tailored shirt, belted trousers and thick-soled shoes – walked comfortably into the café; she knew the place well, or perhaps she was just comfortable everywhere, and located May at once:

‘Bonjour.’

‘Bonjour.’ May gave her hand. This was possibly very English of her, but ‘quaint’, she hoped.

A large smile sprang out onto the writer's face. Ash-grey eyes.

It was rather dark in this corner. Did May agree? Should they find a table somewhere else? So they did. In silence, they made their way to a table further along, next to the windows.

'Un café noir.' And May had the same.

They sat opposite each other. Francine observed her in silence; perhaps she was reading her face. May tried not to think anything. Francine looked like an intellectual, May was thinking; and she was thinking that Francine had an 'intelligent haircut': short and neat and easy to look after. She stopped thinking and held her breath. A few seconds passed. Then Francine spoke:

'How old are you?' she asked.

'Thirty-one.'

'Just!'

Meaning?

'What sign are you?' she then asked, and, 'Show me your palm . . . Ah!' Francine held May's palm open like an oyster-shell in one hand, while she traced above the lines with the other. 'I see an intuitive side, and an artistic side,' she read. And then, 'Ah! Ah!' Strangely enough, May could not now recall the rest. She was perhaps not paying attention. *Ah-Ah*, something.

Francine brought out a folder. 'I have a few of my articles here for your university task: "Cavete, feminae" (Beware, women), "Le Féminin au rabais", "Le Féminin et ses enjeux", "Le Féminin invalide: comment lui redonner sa valeur" . . .'. Francine started arranging the essays from most recent to the earliest. 'I have been very busy, as you can see,' she stated with no false humility. 'And now you will be busy until our next meeting. You will give me your opinion.'

May took the papers, and started flicking through the titles. Francine, who had done her work, sat back and drank her coffee.

'What do you want to do with your life?' she now asked May, who was carefully sliding the hefty folder into her bag.

May tried to think up something she should desire.

‘What do you want to make of your life?’ Francine reworded her question.

‘I’m reading quite a bit, for the PhD.’

‘What is your deepest desire?’ Francine made the question clearer.

May sat there.

‘I’m going to give you some homework. Do you agree with this plan? You are going to look up the word “desire” and you are going to write about what it means to you. And you are going to keep a note of your *dreams* – but of course!’ she added at that point; not that May had disagreed with her ‘Because if you want to understand others, you first have to understand yourself.’

Thus, unexpectedly, May had found herself a spiritual guide.