Her Secrets (For Katya)
Author(s): John Berger
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From the age of five or six I was worried about the death of my parents. My version of my life can be one of the first things I learnt about the world on my own. Nobody else spoke of it yet the signs were so clear.

Every time I went to bed—and in this I am sure I was like millions of other children—the fear that one or both my parents might die in the night touched the nape of my neck with its finger. Such a fear has, I believe, little to do with a particular psychological climate and a great deal to do with nightfall. Yet since it was impossible to say: You won’t die in the night, will you? (when Grandmother died, I was told she had gone to have a rest, or—this was from my Uncle who was more outsides—that she had passed over), since I couldn’t ask the real question and I sought a reassurance, I invented—like millions before me—the ephemeris: See you in the morning! To me, messaging your hand. It’s meant to be pleasurable.

To tell you the truth, dear, it doesn’t make much difference. What plane are you taking back?

Mumble your other hand.

You are all worried, she said, especially when there are several of you. I’m not. Maureen asked me the other day: What’s the difference between cremated or buried. Doesn’t make one iota of difference to me. How could it?

She shut her eyes to think.

For the first time in her life and in mine, she could openly place the wrapped enigma between us. She didn’t watch me watching it, for we had never, not even as small children, imitated her gestures.

I learnt how to smile at her, her eyes still shut, she fingered the necklace, cushioned by the dark and my father died ten years ago. She knew that at that moment her faith was a secret in a bound to be stronger than any faith of mine in facts. With her eyes shut, she fingered the Arabian necklace I’d attached round her neck with a charm against the evil eye. I’d given her the necklace a few hours before. Perhaps for the first time I had offered her something and now her hand kept looking for it.

She opened her eyes. What time is it? Quarter to four.

It’s not interesting talking to me, you know. I don’t have any ideas any more. I’ve had a good life. Why don’t you take a walk? Katya asked her.

When you are very old, she told Katya confidentially, there’s one thing that’s very difficult—it’s very difficult to persuade other people that you’re happy.

She let her head go back on to the pillow. As I came back in, she smiled.

In her right hand she held a crumpled paper handkerchief. With it she dabbed from time to time the corner of her mouth when she felt there was the slightest excess of spit there. The gesture was the remnant of one of those which, many years before, she used to wipe her mouth after drinking Earl Grey tea and eating watercress sandwiches. Meanwhile with her left hand she fingered the necklace, cushioned on her forgotten bosom.

Love, my mother had the habit of saying, is the only thing that counts in this world. Real love, she would add, to avoid any factitious misunderstanding. But apart from that simple adjective, she never added anything more. 

It’s not my hearing that’s bad though.

Perhaps the play was obsolete, I suggested.

She opened her eyes again. The body had closed shop, she announced. Nothing, nothing at all. She placed a hand on her neck. It’s a good thing, make no mistake about it, John, it makes the waiting easier.

On her bedside table was a tin of Grey tea and eating watercress sandwiches. Meanwhile with her left hand she fingered the necklace, cushioned on her forgotten bosom.

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Victoria B. Basu