

ADELE
PARKS

*If You
Go
Away*

R
headline
review

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MARCH 1914

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27th March 1914

Dearest Diary, I have waited for such a long time for today. Eighteen years, nine months and ten days. My entire life. Forever.

VIVIAN CAREFULLY UNDERLINED the word *forever* and in a somewhat uncharacteristic gesture hugged the diary to her as though it was a child. Vivian Foster wasn't prone to being especially giddy – amongst her friends she was considered the most knowing and realistic – but today was, without doubt, exceptional.

Forever? There must have been a time when she wasn't aware of how important marrying was, when she was just a child and concerned with paddling in streams, making perfume from crushed rose petals or picking brambles. Then all she'd waited for was the next sunny day. She just couldn't remember that time. Perhaps she'd written what she had because writing in diaries made her nervous. Stomach fluttery. She was not sure she wanted to be so known, and certainly not by her already far too controlling mother, nosy younger siblings or a cheeky maid, which was the risk. Diaries were dishonest. When she wrote in hers, she fell into a persona that was quite close to her best self but far from her true self, an insurance against prying eyes. She kept her true self buried practically all of the time. Eighteen-year-old girls weren't exactly

encouraged to say what they thought; in fact they weren't encouraged to think at all. Writing that she had waited 'forever' for this day was the sort of thing that could not cause any real trouble; it was the type of comment that people expected young, virginal debutantes to write. Naïve. Forgivably imprecise.

Almost the entire Foster family understood the importance of today. Vivian's two younger sisters Susan and Barbara (the latter known to all as Babe, as Mrs Foster's way of signalling to Mr Foster that there would be no more babies) were obligingly awestruck. They sat on Vivian's bed, mouths slightly ajar, eyes glazed with excitement, as she wafted around her room, opening the wardrobe door, fingering the tin of talcum powder, playing with the ribbons on her dresses, until she sent them back to the nursery with an imperious wave of the arm. Of course they were impressed. Vivian was older than them (by two and six years respectively) and had been attending balls whilst they were tucked up in bed, a fact that was too compelling for them to ever consider contradicting her. Her brother Toby, four years her junior, was nonplussed. His gender gave him a strong sense of superiority that, somewhat annoyingly, overrode the age discrepancy.

It was absolutely true to say that since coming out eight months ago, Vivian had been waiting for this exact day, and there wasn't a huge difference in her imagination between eight months and forever, because before she came out, she was more or less nothing.

She was simply waiting.

A schoolgirl who could be bossed and directed by almost anyone: parents, close and distant relatives, Nanny, the governess, neighbours, the vicar and anyone Mrs Foster had ever been intimate with, who still might be found in the drawing room on Thursday 'at homes'. Providing a person was old and wealthy enough to have opinions, it was accepted that they could foist them upon young girls, who had to receive them (however ridiculous) in silence. That

was why Vivian believed today to be so important. Everything changed.

Sometimes it had seemed as though this day would never come around; irrationally she'd feared that longing for it so ardently might lead to a catastrophic, logic-defying interruption to the passage of time, but time had ultimately surrendered and the day had arrived.

Nathaniel Thorpe.

The big, athletic sort, over six feet tall, straight white teeth, blond hair, lashes a woman might envy and a chin a man might lose an eye on. He was always ruddy and muddy from the games he played: football and rugby, cricket in the summer. He was forever shooting or hunting or riding. The things people said of him. Vigorous. Handsome. Dashing. Eminently marriageable. Evidently desirable. He left her feeling tremulous.

She'd known of him for years, although they'd only been able to speak once she came out. He was her aunt's neighbour and the sole reason a month in the country every summer, since she was thirteen years old, had been bearable. His family owned hundreds and hundreds of acres of land, perhaps thousands, all around her aunt's village, as far as the eye could see. She'd often watched from the upstairs windows, longing for that rare occasion when he was home from Eton and she might catch him, his cousins and friends discharging their guns and making their horses sweat as they galloped across the adjacent fields chasing something or other: a fox, a hare, good times. She had wondered how rich he was exactly. There seemed to be no limit as to what he could afford. It was hard to imagine. He'd finished at Oxford. Or maybe it had finished with him; it wasn't clear if he'd been sent down or had even gone up. Even though they were friendly now, it was not the sort of thing she could ask. She didn't want to bother or nag. Her mother no doubt had made enquiries. Discreetly. She'd have wanted to know if there were debts or prospects, scandals or

intentions. She couldn't have heard anything too awful or off-putting, as Vivian had been allowed to pursue him. Gently, appropriately, unobtrusively. There was a way to do these things.

She knew that.

Well before her own coming-out ball she'd been instructed as to what she needed to do to draw his attention. She was lucky enough to have been born with what everyone agreed to be the sort of face that – more often than not – pleased. It was the first and last thing people thought about her. She was lovely to look at. They never wondered whether she was kind or reliable, able or resourceful. She wasn't encouraged to give these attributes too much consideration either.

Mrs Foster often began her days with a quiet feeling of superiority. It was hard not to. Her daughter had been such a success this season. As a child her relentless energy and impulsiveness had, frankly, been rather exhausting, but it was a skill that transferred quite nicely now they were husband hunting. Vivian was obsessively attentive to her grooming. Her hems did not dare to hang; the maids in the powder rooms at dances never had to come to her rescue with a quick stitch – she was far too in control to need that sort of service. Other girls were so sluggish and neglectful by comparison. Vivian's younger sisters would linger in bed far later than was polite if permitted. Susan in particular had a slow sort of nature. Her voluptuous figure was testament to that; she was entirely lacking in will power. So many girls, restricted by corsets and convention, only ever moved languidly, as though they were wading through wet sand. Vivian was altogether different, luckily. She was sprightly. Energetic. Every bit of her had a use; there was nothing unnecessary or wasteful.

Of course, as a mother, Mrs Foster had a duty to control and direct that energy, subdue her impulsiveness. It was a good thing her daughter was noticed, but she didn't want her to be set apart. That would be a catastrophe. Vivian was trained and instructed

on the importance of utilising her looks, charm and energy to the full but never hinting at wilfulness or independence. She must delight absolutely everyone. She had listened and soon the mothers trusted her, the fathers were charmed by her, the other girls adored her and the men insisted they would fight duels for her, if such a thing still went on. The opinion was that despite her waning family fortune, Vivian Foster was a success. Behind their fans the more honest chaperones often commented that she put other young ladies in the shade. She had something rare.

Mrs Foster's feeling of superiority would have been entirely obliterated if she'd known that occasionally Vivian stood naked in front of the mirror admiring her lean long legs, her tiny waist, her small but pert breasts, whilst thinking it such a pity that no one else ever got to see any of it. She was used to accepting compliments about her face, hair and eyes; she could only imagine the sort of things *he* might say about the rest of her body. And imagine it she did as she gently trailed her fingers down her body. Luckily Mrs Foster's peace of mind was never disturbed, because her involvement with her daughter was formal, superficial, while Vivian, for her part, understood the value of secrecy. She never undressed without wedging a chair under the handle of her bedroom door.

For all Nathaniel Thorpe liked hunting and shooting and fishing and what-have-you, Vivian was relieved to discover that he also spent a lot of time in London. Young men did. Why wouldn't they? This was where the best parties happened. Vivian believed she simply couldn't live anywhere else, although when she said as much to her mother, Mrs Foster simply raised her eyebrows and commented that Vivian would live wherever her husband decided she'd live. Vivian had mumbled 'Poppycock' under her breath.

'What did you say?' asked Mrs Foster, who believed she had a right to her daughter's every thought.

'I said you're probably right, Mother.' Vivian threw out a disingenuous smile.

'I *am* right. I'm always right.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Mrs Foster had endeavoured to tell Vivian the basic facts of life, although she was keen to avoid going into embarrassing or tedious detail. Instead she offered three rules, two of which had subsections. One, Vivian was told never to travel alone in a railway carriage with a man. Two, she was never to contradict or interrupt a potential suitor when he was talking, though she should stop him if he tried to touch her body anywhere higher than her elbow or knee. Three, she was never to discourage any man who asked for a dance, but she should not allow a chap more than two dances in a row.

Vivian was aware that this was inadequate preparation for anything much, most of all a season.

Her friends were a far better source of information. Even before she came out, she'd heard the words adultery (something old marrieds did) and fornication (something maids and sluts did); and, more shocking still, therefore necessitating a Latin word, *cunnilingus* (something she couldn't imagine anyone really did).

She was curious.

In the past year, Vivian had sent herself to sleep by rubbing her stomach, a slow, circular caress. The tips of her fingers became familiar with every sensation her nightgown could provide: the smooth rise of embroidery, the flat glide of ribbon, the slight friction offered up by cotton. She liked to feel her bumpy ribs, the gentle inward curve of her waist and then the hardness of her hip bones. It wasn't long before she started to send herself to sleep by laying her hand flat on the mound that created a triangle between her hip bones and where her legs joined. It felt warm, safe, to leave it there. Then she wanted to know what it would feel like if there wasn't the barrier of fabric. She told herself there was no harm, it was her body. No one need know. Yet it stirred a sudden muted pang, a quickening of the beating of her heart.