

LATE WHITE BLOSSOM

(5993 words)

BY

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I pretend to not recognise her.

Instead, I hide my deceit behind a poker-face, one which has served me well down the years whenever I have felt cornered.

My tone is abrupt, which instantly creates the wounded look on her face, but I am playing a game. I'm good at mind-games: it offers me a diversion from the drudgery of my existence. *Something* in my brain tells me I should come clean though. She doesn't deserve my deception, or my contempt.

After all, I was in love with her once. Still am, I suppose.

She stands in front of me, waiting in anticipation for me to correct myself. I can see the hope in her eyes. I wait, then reveal that my charade is a tease, a poor joke. The lie is with me. Her face lightens.

I sit quietly by the French doors to my drawing room, which overlooks the walled garden at the rear of the home in Shropshire we once shared many years ago. Sadly, I now live alone, a prisoner of my own unfathomable conscience. My only visitor is the day nurse who pops in during the morning on Tuesday and a Friday. Her name is Jenny, and she is my only contact with the outside world. Except for the home help, but I don't count her. She has a miserable disposition, which some would argue fits neatly with my outlook. We should be a perfect match. It seems everyone else has abandoned me over the years. I have a laptop for company but it isn't the same.

I'm now confronted by this unexpected visitor, and it perturbs me. *What does she want after all these years of separation?*

Before I start off with an ill-tempered rant in her direction (I'm prone to fly off the handle at the slightest provocation), let me fill you in with a short resume of my professional life, which hopefully will colour in the background as to my natural inclination for sufferance, but not necessarily guilt. I'll skip the personal stuff for the minute, for that is normally where it all goes so horribly wrong for me.

My name is Nathan McGarry, and I am a novelist. Most writers can be construed as weirdly insular in their behaviour, as we tend to view everything as a subplot to real life. That's why our marriages usually fail. I have had modest literary success down the decades, earned a few bob, but write very little these days. I am approaching my eighty-eighth birthday and arthritis is now badly affecting my hand

capabilities, which is a lame excuse for being bone idle. The truth of the matter is I haven't had a decent idea for a commercial book for many a year. I write to amuse myself these days, and get bored with my efforts. My agent has long dropped my name from his authors' list and my publishers humour me with polite rejection whenever I get the urge to send something in. Who wants to entertain the ramblings of an old codger like me in this modern age?

I've digressed from the ever present. Typical of me: forever avoiding confrontation. It gets too messy. Anyway, would you believe there is snow on the ground, in April; the tiny birds pick over a few bits of bread that I managed to toss to them through the open window earlier in the morning. Most days I sit here, wrapped in a fleece blanket, and think back over my history and reflect on the damage I have caused to myself and to others. But I don't cry.

By now the woman sits silently by my side as Jenny kindly makes tea for the both of us in the kitchen, out of ear-shot.

I cannot avoid it any longer and stare into this woman's emerald eyes and try to see through my fog of confusion, and attempt to claw out, like you do with a dead lobster on a plate, the best bits she played in our fractured relationship (I confess: I've had way too many of these down the years with the fairer sex, which has probably been the main contribution to my financial downturn). However, she infers something meaningful because her smile is sympathetic. I think this is a good sign and my nervousness begins to rescind somewhat.

By some miracle, I have managed to shave and tidy myself up today. I often stay in my pyjamas and rub my stubble while I contemplate the disasters of both career and marriage fuck-ups. I'm pleased that I'm half-decently turned out as it so happens. Slowly, and with great difficulty, I begin to muddle through the past experiences I once had with my companion and my eyes begin to twinkle like Brighton Pier on a winter's night. I've been accused of being emotionally retarded by former girlfriends but on this occasion I'm touched genuinely because I manage to recall the good times over the bad (against my better judgement, I should add). She stretches forward and takes my hand, and squeezes reassuringly. We have a connection. I'm not such a bad man after all.

'How are you, Nate?'

Her smile widens and I am grateful for the kindness, although I feel like a specimen in a jar.

'Do you remember me?' She asks.

After a moment of private withdrawal I nod in her direction. Often I shut down as the fears creep back in. Demons have been toying with me just recently. I imagine I am incarcerated in a cage of doubts and insecurities... taunted by those women

most harmed by my unhealthy devotion and spiteful rhetoric down the years. These are ghosts from my past returning to haunt me.

I call them warm corpses.

'Can you tell me your name?' I reply, taking the cup of tea from Jenny and sipping slowly, trying not to dribble. *I damn well know her name.*

'It's Christina...Surely you cannot have forgotten me?'

I reckon she's been primed as to my medical prognosis...perhaps by Jenny who had opened the door to her earlier. Women can gang up on us poor fellows if we're not careful, and so we need our wits about us.

I do remember her of course. She was my wife. The problem (and this is genuine, I promise) is trying to place her within a catalogue of matrimonial disasters as I have a grand total of four divorces to my name over a sixty year time span. Not something to be proud of. Oh, how time flies when you're having fun! This is awkward, and I don't want to offend her. She has asked me a question but it is not in my nature to give a straight answer. Death comes at a price, and mine is living with the burden of failure. And now I have this humiliation to contend with. Even my shadow hides from me. Is she here to collect her vengeance before the light of existence disappears from me and robs her of this opportunity to settle old scores?

Perhaps, but I see compassion in those eyes which allows me to relax in the consolation of her companionship. I'm pretty sure she hasn't come to poison my beverage.

'Number four,' she announces as if seeing the panic in my eyes.

The last one then: At least I can still count.

I would have guessed correctly, given time. Ha-ha.

I put my cup down and reach out and caress her hand. She is still beautiful, with wavy silver hair and expertly applied make-up, which helps to hide the battle scars of age. She carries herself well, with straight back and elegant poise, her dress the colour of wheat in a summer field. She still wears pearl ear rings and a matching necklace around her slender throat, which was always her preferred choice in the years of our marriage. I can still recall some things. Other intrusions I prefer to lock away, which many of you will concur with if you have experienced bitter divorce like me. I've just done it more often than most.

'Christina...how lovely,' I respond.

'Are you happy to see me?'

I hesitate. The morning light touches her face and I enjoy looking at her laughter lines. I'm pretty sure I didn't contribute to any of those. I'm also pretty convinced that she must have been a real stunner in her heyday...but alas, I met her in later life when maturity had gradually robbed her of the natural bloom of youth (I don't give compliments easily).

But when exactly did we meet?

I try to recount the years and place a time to our union, but it is proving difficult. Perhaps my ability to do the simple arithmetic is not so simple. My doctor tells me I have dementia, but I'm doing well for my advanced age. I don't want pity. I'd rather choose suicide when the time is right.

'I'm happy to see you,' I reply willingly, and then insert the cautionary question: '*Should I be?*'

Christina shuffles in her seat and finishes her tea, her eyes scanning the white-sprinkled lawn.

'The blossom tree survives,' she notes, pointing toward the garden with a highly-polished erotic red fingernail. She's clearly made an effort, and I am more than grateful.

I follow her gaze.

'Did we plant it?' I counter.

'We did, in May of 2002.'

'It's gone from strength to strength,' I say, and then, seeing the flicker in her eye, add tactlessly, '...Unlike us, I gather?'

Her smile turns to a quiver as she leans toward me and whispers, 'We had our moments, Nate.'

We fall into silence, and then she comments: 'There are no buds on the tree as yet...'

'Blame it on the harshness of the winter,' I reply.

Christina says, 'The tree still sleeps but the late blossom will be welcome in the coming weeks.'

'Everything is too late to be honest,' I add.

Jenny interrupts our melancholy and takes my blood pressure, checks my temperature and monitors my heart beat on a portable machine.

I'm bullish with my next comment. 'Why are you here, Christina?'

I note the nurse immediately gathers the used crockery on a tray and moves off to the kitchen, no doubt to avoid the awkwardness of my acute directness. Christina remains purposely silent as Jenny returns to discuss my pills for the week ahead and then departs with her instructions still ringing in my ears.

I'm stuck in my chair, speed no longer an attribute I can rely on. I have to face the music after such a crass comment. It was a stupid thing to say so early in our conversation. I could have been more gracious: Never my strongest point.

Christina stands, smoothes her dress and moves to the window. Her face is angelic, like that from a painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Her profile in the slanting light is strong, forthright, and...dare I say it...sexy. Funny how certain things stick in the mind. I frequently forget what I did only yesterday, or even this morning, but I still know all the names of the pre-Raphaelite founder artists. How would my doctor explain that one? In the meantime, Christina begins to talk and I am rudely slow on the uptake, preferring to be entranced by this vision of loveliness standing before me. Her words wash over me. Certain images come flooding back as I crave her delectable body once again. Well, the body she once possessed, eh? Her breasts were a thing of divine worship to behold back then, I can tell you right now. Her legs are still good. I smell her fragrance and die in the crush of regret.

'I'm sorry,' I mutter, and wave my hands in order to disturb her quiet monologue. 'I drifted off, I'm afraid. A sign of my advanced age...Could you start again and I promise to concentrate this time...'

Our lovemaking was spectacular, our cruelty and tenderness entwined like two fighting snakes that both squeezed and stretched our passion and hatred to breaking point. But, oh, how I adored her even in the most demanding of times. Sometimes love forces fate to take a wrong turn. Perhaps it is the final act of mercy. I reckon we would have killed each other if we had stayed together.

'I was just saying that this house holds many memories for me, none more so than the blossom tree that we dug into the ground that year, the year we separated. I'm glad it has survived. I came to see you to tell you that I have news which you might be interested in. Do you remember Rob, my son?'

'Your son..?'

'He *did* live with us,' she states with a waspish tongue.

'Hm, I do struggle with the names...'

'Evidently...'. She turns and faces me. 'Rob is ill and I'm moving abroad to help look after him.'

'*Abroad?*'

'My son lives in Toronto and he wants me to move over there so he can be close to me, and I to him.'

I'm struggling now. 'What is your son's name?'

She throws back her head in despair.

'Is it too difficult for you to say his name?'

I drop my gaze, perplexed (*games*, again). I stare back with a vacant expression, fully aware that I choose my own path on which to tread. Some people call it selective memory or bloody-mindedness. I call it vindictiveness.

Typically, I drift into another world of my choosing. Right, there were seven original members as I recall, so let's give it a go: *Rossetti, of course; then Hunt, Millais, James Collinson...*

'Rob was fifteen when we met. Does that ring any bells?'

I toy with her. 'Did he live with us?'

'At weekends, but you were never that close. Let's just say that he wasn't part of your life plan.'

'I'm sorry if I was insensitive to your needs.'

'No you're not sorry...but that's in the past.'

*Stephens*...that's five: I'm struggling now.

I return to the matter in hand. 'When are you going?'

Her eyes narrow and she blinks in confusion. 'You mean *now...today?* Do you want me to leave? Is that what you are asking?'

I ridicule her: '*When* are you going to Toronto?'

She returns the laughter nervously. 'Oh, soon: Within the next six weeks.'

'And you came to tell me this...after...after...How long have we been apart?'

'Fifteen years.'

'Have we spoken during that time?'

'No.'

'And you suddenly decided to just call in unannounced..?'

She brings a hand to her mouth. 'Yes.'

'Will you stay for lunch? It will have to be a simple affair...'

Christina checks her watch. 'I'll pass.'

'Have you a more pressing appointment, Christina?'

'I do as it so happens...'

I implore, 'Another time then?'

'I doubt there will be another time...'

My brain kicks in. 'You re-enter my life, cause havoc to my hormones (she laughs loudly at this remark) and now you are simply going to disappear without explanation?'

'I needed to see you one last time.'

'Before I keel over and die?'

'It crossed my mind.'

'That's telling it straight.'

'You've always batted that way, even when it hurt people for real.'

'And this isn't considered *for real*?'

'I won't be drawn into your spider's web, Nate.'

I let it go. 'What do you really want, Christina?'

She approaches, leans over and gently kisses my balding forehead.

'I will be moving a long way away and this is a chance to tell you that I have always loved you, in spite of the suffering we endured during our marriage. Looking back, it was the best of times...and I want you to know this.'

Frankly, I'm shocked by this last remark. I can handle any amount of abuse that she might want to throw at me but this...this...sentimental piffle has rendered me speechless. Well, almost.

'Shall we have more tea?' I ask.

She's gracious enough to do the honours as I sit alone and shuffle in my chair, wondering if there is a sideswipe to all this. As you know, I have been married four times, and three of my former wives have never even sent me as much as a practical joke card when I first ended up in hospital with heart trouble: Shame on each of them for missing the golden opportunity to kick a man when he's down. Two of them have since died, the other living it up in Spain from the hefty divorce settlement the smartass lawyer negotiated for her. I hope she chokes on the paella. Christina, on

the other hand, is here, making me tea and making me feel like I still owe her. What does she mean by *the best of times*?

My mind wanders once more. I come off the back of an austere upbringing, which included the rationing years imposed during and after the Second World War. My father worked in the Co-op all his working life, my mother a willing servant to her four squabbling sons. I enlisted and saw active service at the end of the hostilities. My elder brother was killed in Italy in 1944 by an unexploded bomb he was trying to defuse. Today, I snub my other younger siblings. We fell out over *something*. I suggest you are beginning to see the greater picture. I am a loner, happy to hide behind the protection of the fiction I write. I'm safe there, and there I shall remain.

I have been lucky to shape nine novels, a book of short stories and somehow managed to compose dreadful poetry... some of which got published but never read by the wider public. Only one novel, *The Dare*, received a measure of global acceptance and a much needed boost to my income. The rest of my work fell into obscurity. I managed to keep my head above water, financially speaking, by running my own funeral parlour for the best part of thirty years. There is money to be made in death. Yes, yes, I can hear your merriment at this apt choice of trade, given my generous spirit and ability to reach out and comfort others in their hour of need. Of course I could do spiritual support...but I rather preferred the alcoholic version. Hey, it was a worthy job and all my wives got rich on the outcome of my endeavours so stop the judgement, OK?

The tea is welcome and so is the sight of such exquisiteness in my life once again. I'd forgotten how a little tenderness can take away physical pain. Momentarily the agony of old joints and crumbling skin, failing eyesight and ill-fitting dentures is forgotten, but it is an illusion of course. Any deal with the devil is always a contract without exit.

Talking about death and all things morbid (Jenny is concerned about my cholesterol levels rising again) I'm onto more important issues and advance the notion that if Christina settles in Canada then I will not be able to visit her grave.

She ponders this and says, 'Do you intend to outlive me then?'

I take her point as she is so much younger than me (another downward spiral...) and reply, 'Well, no.'

'Then I shall visit you.'

'All the way from across the Atlantic..?'

'At least you won't be able to answer me back from six feet under. That'll be a first.'

We chuckle.

Christina replenishes the tea cups from the pot.

*Rossetti's brother, William, of course: That's number six.*

A ginger tom jumps down from the wall outside and the birds scatter in flight. The predator comes to the window and eyeballs us like we were goldfish in a bowl. I hate cats. They are selfish creatures, always on the prowl, a bit like me. I won't tolerate competition, and looking back maybe that is one of the reasons for my loneliness today. Rob divided us: Just a theory, of course.

I reckon Christina can read my thoughts, for she remarks in an instant: 'Rob was in the way, I can see that now. You only wanted me and of course you couldn't separate us. I loved you both but you forced me to choose. No mother would willingly abandon their own flesh and blood. He wasn't that to you, fair enough, but you under-estimated my maternal bond.'

'I killed our love affair.'

'You killed our commitment.'

'Is there a difference?'

'As a writer you should know that there is.'

'I'm ancient, Christina, and I lack finesse and manners and moderation and the patience to understand the diverse points of view that you make. Sad, but true...'

'Sad, but true,' she echoes.

I manage to lift myself up and totter around the room to stretch my aching limbs. It's an effort but it needs to be done. I eventually stand before her, my shadow touching her skin.

'Thank you for coming to see me,' I say. 'I regret that our marriage failed. It was my fault entirely.'

I thought she was going to choke on her Earl Grey.

'Now that's what I call an admission of guilt,' she bellows, swallowing hard to clear her throat.

'I can admit to things, you know.'

'I'm impressed.'

'What shall we do, marry again?'

I knew that would bring merriment to the room.

'You're foolish to the extreme,' she says, suppressing her giggling.

'I shan't repeat the offer, and it's a good one...'

She checks her watch again.

I'm grumpy. 'What's so pressing?'

'I have someone waiting in the car.'

'Oh, you should have said so earlier. Is it someone I know?'

She hesitates.

'Rob and his wife, Lydia, actually,' she says. They are over here to help me sell the house in order to relocate as quickly as possible.'

'Would you like them to come in?' It's the least I can offer, but I'm hoping the answer is a negative.

'I doubt he'll want to come in. Besides, I said I would only be half an hour.'

'Then you need to get going...'

'Yes.'

Christina rises and fidgets with the collar of her dress.

'I feel remorseful for my behaviour, Christina. I so wish we had made our marriage work and I am sorry that your son feels he cannot meet with me after all these years. I realise now that I tried to alienate him, which is a sin.'

'He's stubborn like his mother, I suppose.'

'Well, you're here and I'm very pleased for that.'

She smiles thinly, and endorses the viewpoint: 'So am I.'

'It puts things to rest, eh?'

She nods, stretches into her red woollen coat and collects her handbag and gloves from the side table.

'Goodbyes are always difficult,' I reflect.

'I couldn't leave without saying one,' she says, and leans over and embraces me. 'It wouldn't seem right, and I couldn't have you feeling disillusioned by my thoughtlessness if I had simply disappeared without a trace.'

'*Bitter* would be the correct description. I excel at being consumed by bitterness. It's what keeps me young, ha-ha.'

'Try to see my point of view, Nate...'

‘And what would that be?’

‘I want to leave without regret, and seeing you for this brief moment will somehow help to put my house in order.’

I tut-tut. ‘Ah, so you want my permission to leave, eh? I’m surmising that the distance between us, emotionally that is, has not over the intervening years diminished and you now need to rid yourself of any guilt you feel from abandoning me in my hour of need.’

‘That’s cruel and unnecessary, and you know it.’

‘For what it’s worth, you don’t require my acceptance of the situation. I relinquished any right to pass judgement from the day we divorced.’

Christina turns and gazes one last time at the blossom tree, then at me and I know this will be the last time too that I would chance upon her beauty. If only I could capture this treasured moment, hold onto it somehow but alas, it will prove to be as fleeting as the old tom that had vanished earlier when it soon sensed that there was nothing doing by just hanging around for the sake of it. It knew not to expect anything better from me.

I try to make it easier for her. ‘Like the song says *I did it my way.*’

‘Don’t be mad with me, Nate.’

I shake my head, ‘*That* I could never be.’

‘Will you think of me?’

‘Only when I breathe...’

‘Aha, the old jokes are the best.’

I close my eyes and immerse myself in the closeness of her skin and the delicate perfume that clings to my shirt collar. It will linger for a while and then fade away, just like her. I’m tired and our love story, turbulent as it was, has allowed me to think that I have achieved something worthwhile in my life, for that is the only reason that has brought her to my door. This shared connection clearly meant a great deal to her too, and for that I am grateful.

I’m a cantankerous old fool, brought up in the aftermath of the war. I’ve witnessed the gradual deterioration of the high moral code which meant so much back then to that special generation of people.

This is an empty world, and I’m glad to be leaving it.

‘Everything is fucked,’ I say, and instantly apologise for my crude language.

‘We’ve done with apologies,’ she replies.

It is then that I realise that her visit has been a gift to me. Long after she has departed, I will cherish this bittersweet reunion: her smell; the decency that she has accorded me; her delectable mouth; those hypnotic eyes, the recollection of her fine breasts that I can imagine are still perfect. But above all this I will hold onto the notion that old arguments and divisions can be cast aside for the betterment of compassion for another person's shortcomings. We all have them, even if it takes a lifetime to acknowledge such absurdities... and this woman who stands before me has certainly brought home the truth of the matter: the difference between what is right and what is wrong can be measured by the degree of hurt that one can alleviate in the barometer of another's private suffering. Forgiveness is a powerful and seductive tool. I've learnt that today, even if it's a little late for me to put it into practice. But I have other means at my disposal to express how much I care for her approval.

'Before you go, I would like to give you something,' I say, after what seems an eternity of wishful thinking.

'Oh?'

I point with the instruction: 'In the top drawer.'

Christina pulls out a thick heavy A4 envelope which she plonks down on the table top.

'I'm guessing it is your latest book,' she says.

'My latest failure, as I doubt it will be published.'

'Really?'

'It was written for you, actually.'

She stares at me, intrigue in her eyes.

'What's it called?'

I half-smile, and say, '*Late white blossom.*'

She sits beside me again and cradles the manuscript in her lap.

'Is it a novel?' she asks.

'A love letter, of sorts...'

She lifts the package and remarks, 'A pretty big love letter, judging by the weight!'

I gather my thoughts and choose my words carefully. 'Well, it's a one hundred and six thousand word apology to be precise.'

'How long has it taken you to write it?'

'Around fifteen years.'

She falls silent and drops her gaze, before whispering, 'Ever since the divorce, I would guess then...'

'That would be close enough.'

'When did you intend for me to read it?'

'After I'm dead...'

'Why give it to me now?'

'Because it is appropriate,' I say.

'*Appropriate?*'

'I never envisaged this day would happen, and the reassurance you have brought me with your visit. It is humbling. I wrote the story as a tribute to a remarkable lady, one that I callously disposed of through stupidity and a reckless disregard for the love and loyalty and wisdom that you brought to our union. I did not value those attributes and I do not see what you see even today. I lacked humility, then and even now. We cannot turn the clock back, but my extended letter to you will, I hope, help redress the harm and sorrow I caused you and your son.'

'Can he read it as well?'

'That would be good.'

'I'm touched, and I'm at a loss of what to say to be honest...'

'Well, read it first and speak later. Is that a deal?'

She took my hand. 'Deal.'

'You have someone waiting in the car...I'll be in trouble for keeping you beyond the allotted time.'

Christina rises for the last occasion, the package held tight under her arm. I see her to the door and bade her farewell with a kiss to the cheek. There are no tears thankfully. I catch a glimpse of the young man sitting in the car as his mother climbs in beside him. They seem at first cautious until I catch them examining the envelope with what I then perceive as excitement, but he doesn't look my way.

I return to my chair by the window and settle down with a little dram of whisky for companionship. My nurse would not approve but my doctor insists it's good for me. I soon fall asleep with my dreams, but the images are confusing, just as my daily

routine is becoming. I am scared of dying alone, being discovered by Jenny as I lay in my own vomit and piss on the floor.

Dignity must be preserved. In my darkest hour, I contemplate suicide but I fear that I will cock this up and end my days in a hospital bed dependant on machinery to keep me ticking over. The prospect of this awakens me, nearly bringing on a heart attack; such is the irony of my predicament. So I try and sleep some more and thankfully I do.

A knock on the door disturbs me.

I have lost track of time and day. I clear my head and hear the sound again, hoping Christina has returned. Slowly, I lift myself and make for the door, surprised to find Jenny smiling broadly at me.

She pushes past me and half way down the hall comments: 'I hope you have been taking your pills correctly, Nathan.'

*What is she talking about?* I saw her perhaps a couple of hours ago. I close the door and follow the sound of clattering coming from the kitchen.

'Tea?' she asks.

'I've just had some.'

Her eyes scan the uncluttered worktops and sink. 'You can't neglect yourself when I'm not here.' She checks the fridge for food. 'When is the home help next in?'

'Tomorrow, I think. What day is it...?'

'Friday, and you need milk and bread when she calls, OK?'

'Can you write it down?'

She scribbles on the pad.

'Talking of writing, you do want me to set up your laptop?'

'Yes please.'

'Then we'll check your blood pressure.'

She boots up the computer, and says, 'You have a message.'

I sit down at the desk and try to gather my thoughts, which are consumed by my lust for my former wife. Even old gits like me can still have fantasies. I seem to be brain dead and struggle to bring up the emails.

Jenny returns from the kitchen and holds up an unopened packet and waves it at me.

'This is naughty, these pills are vital to you,' she says, admonishing me like a school child, which I am fast becoming as the years slip by.

'I'm sorry, but I'm getting forgetful...'

'That's why you have a chart.'

'I forget to look at the chart,' I answer sheepishly.

She brings me two tablets and a glass of water.

I take them whilst she carries out her checks on my useless body. I feel like an old relic being picked over.

'Jenny, what did you make of...Christina?'

She's pre-occupied, and talks on automatic pilot, ignoring me. Her mobile rings and she drifts into another room as she takes the call.

'What did you say?' she asks on her return.

'I...oh, nothing...I can't even remember what we were talking about...'

She smiles, and suggests: 'Now, how about that cup of tea?'

I nod approvingly, clicking onto my latest email:

**Thank you for sending us your latest M/S entitled Late White Blossom which we read with interest. While we liked the story as a whole we feel it does not fit in with what we are looking for at present. I am sure that you will find success elsewhere in securing a publisher for your work.**

*Elsewhere...*The word sticks in my throat.

Alienation is a crime in this world.

Somewhat deflated (pissed off actually), I discard the computer and have a wander to the sideboard and check the top drawer. The package is not there. I return to my chair and sit in silence as I drink my tea, Jenny at my side.

'Look,' she says, pointing to the sunlit garden. 'The blossom has started to form at long last...'

I lament: *Christina, Christina.*

I can only think of her. But now she is *elsewhere*, I fear: Gone forever.

My last love letter will be my epitaph, and I'm pleased with that.

I hope she was real. I hope she thinks of me from time to time.

Jenny and I walk to the front door, and I am feeling beaten, beaten beyond words. Silence, like the winter, is unforgiving sometimes but we have to endure what comes our way.

I get a surprise hug from Jenny, which lifts my spirits. As she closes the gate at the end of the path, I notice an object on the wall, which I hadn't seen before.

'What is that?' I call.

Jenny follows my gaze and lifts something in the air, and answers me.

'A pair of ladies leather gloves: I found them on the pavement and placed them here just in case someone comes back for them. Do you want me to get rid of them?'

'Leave them on the wall until the next time you call...'

'Will do...'

I watch as she drives off to her next assignment, and then close the door. I'm glad the buds have opened, I'm glad the sun is finally out. I might just sit in the front room for a few hours, and keep an eye on the wall by the gate.

I'll continue to watch until either the dark of the night or sleep finally overtakes me. And then I won't care anymore.

In the meantime, I will sit here and remember everything so vividly in spite of pretending not to.

Ah, number seven... *Thomas Woolner!*

That completes the set. I'm chuffed with that. At the end of the day it's all just games we play, which in my case can be fodder for books I may or may not write. The truth of the matter is I do still love her, but botched the opportunity to tell her when I had the chance. That's why I am on my own.

Rejection is hard to take. It causes each one of us who has experienced this pain to feel alienated and bewildered. At the end of the day, I'm just no good with people.

I'm slumped here feeling traumatised, at odds with the world and slightly irritated by something in my watery eye, but I refuse to believe it is anything else but a speck of dust which needs rubbing out.

Minutes tick by, hours pass, darkness drops its cloak.

I see her smile; feel her breath on my face. I slowly reach out but touch only an empty space.

It is a comfort to have known her though.

The end