

Was it a Dream?

Guy de Maupassant

I had loved her madly!

Why does one love? How strange it is to see only one person in the world, to have only one thought in one's mind, only one desire in the heart, and only one name on one's lips – a name which comes up continually, rising, like the water in a spring, from the depths of the soul to the lips, a name one repeats over and over, which one whispers ceaselessly, like a prayer.

I am going to tell you our story, although love only has one story, and it is always the same. I met her and loved her; that is all. For a whole year I lived on her tenderness, on her caresses in her arms, on her kisses, on her words, so completely wrapped up, bound, and absorbed in everything which came from her that I no longer cared whether it was day or night, or whether I was dead or alive, on this old earth of ours.

And then she died. How? I do not know; I no longer know anything. But one evening she came home wet, for it was raining heavily, and the next day she was feverish and took to her bed. What happened I do not remember now, but doctors came, wrote, and went away. Medicines were brought, and some women made her drink them. Her hands were hot, her forehead was burning, and her eyes bright and sad. When I spoke to her, she answered me, but I do not remember what she said. I have forgotten everything, everything, everything! She died, and I very well remember her slight, feeble sigh. The nurse said, 'Ah!' and I understood. I had lost her!

They consulted me about the funeral. I do not remember anything, though I recollect the coffin, and the sound of the hammer when they nailed her down in it.

She was buried! Buried! She! In that grave! Some people came – female friends, but I made my escape and ran away. I ran, and then walked through the streets, went home, and the next day started on a journey back home to my old village.

It was only yesterday that I returned to

Paris, and when I saw my room again – our room, our bed, our furniture, everything that remained of our life together – I was seized by such a violent attack of fresh grief that I felt like opening the window and throwing myself out into the street. I could not remain any longer among the things and between the walls which had enclosed and sheltered her, which retained a thousand atoms of her, of her skin and of her breath. I took up my hat to make my escape, and just as I reached the door, I passed the large glass in the hall, which she had put there so that she might look at herself every day as she went out, to see if she looked correct and pretty. I stopped short in front of that glass in which she had so often been reflected – so often, that it must have retained her reflection. I stood there, trembling, my eyes fixed on the glass which had possessed her as much as I had.

I went out and toward the cemetery. There I found her simple grave, topped by a white marble cross. Upon the headstone were carved these few words:

She loved, was loved, and died.

She was there, below in the dark depths of the earth! How horrible! I sobbed with my forehead on the ground, and I stopped there for a long time, a long time. Then I saw that it was getting dark, and a strange, mad wish, the wish of a despairing lover, seized me. I wished to pass the night, my last night, by her grave. But how was I to manage? I should be seen and driven out. I was cunning, and got up and began to roam about in that city of the dead. I walked and walked.

At the end of the cemetery, I suddenly realised that I was in its oldest part, where those who had been dead a long time have mingled with the soil, where the crosses themselves are decayed. It is full of untended roses, of strong and dark cypress-trees, a sad and beautiful garden, nourished on human flesh.

I was alone, perfectly alone. So I crouched

in a tree and hid in the thick and sombre branches. I waited, clinging to the trunk, just as a shipwrecked man does to a plank.

When it was quite dark, I left my refuge and began to walk softly, slowly, inaudibly, through that ground full of dead people. I wandered about for a long time, but could not find her tomb again. I went on with extended arms knocking against the tombs, without being able to find her. I groped about like a blind man finding his way, I felt the stones, the crosses, the iron railings, and the wreaths of faded flowers! I read the names, by passing my fingers over the letters. But I could not find her again!

There was no moon. What a night! I was frightened – horribly frightened – as I made my way between the rows of graves. Graves! graves! graves! nothing but graves! On my right, on my left, in front of me, around me, everywhere there were graves! I sat down on one of them, for I could not walk any longer. I could hear my heart beat! And then I heard something else. What was it? A confused, nameless noise. Was the noise in my head, in the impenetrable night, or beneath the mysterious Earth, the Earth sown with human corpses? I looked all around me, but I could not say how long I stayed there; I was paralysed with terror, cold with fright, ready to die.

Suddenly, it seemed to me that the slab of marble on which I was sitting was moving. Then I knew that it was moving, as if it were being raised. With a bound, I sprang on to the neighbouring tomb. Then, I distinctly saw the stone which I had just left rise upright. A dead person appeared, a naked skeleton, pushing the stone aside with its back. An eerie luminescence emanated from the grave. I could see quite clearly, although the night was so dark. On the cross I could now read:

*Here lies Jacques Olivant,
who died at the age of fifty-one.*

*He loved his family, was kind and honourable,
and died in the grace of the Lord.*

The dead man also read what was inscribed on his tombstone; then he picked up a stone off the path, a little, pointed stone, and began to scrape the letters carefully. He slowly erased them, and with the hollows of his eyes he looked at the places where they

had been engraved. Then with the tip of the bone that had been his forefinger, he wrote in luminous letters:

*Here lies Jacques Olivant,
who died at the age of fifty-one.*

*He hastened his father's death by his unkindness,
as he wished to inherit his fortune,
he tortured his wife, tormented his children,
deceived his neighbours, robbed when he could,
and died wretched.*

When he had finished writing, the dead man stood motionless, looking at his work.

A noise behind me further chilled my blood. On turning round I saw that all the graves were open, that all the dead bodies had emerged from them, and that all had erased the lies inscribed on the gravestones by their relations, and were substituting the truth instead. And I saw that all had been tormentors of their neighbours – malicious, dishonest, hypocrites, liars and rogues; that all had stolen, deceived, performed every disgraceful, every unkind action, these good fathers, these faithful wives, these devoted sons, these innocent daughters, these honest tradesmen, these men and women who were called irreproachable. They were all writing the truth, the terrible truth of which everybody was ignorant, or had pretended to be ignorant, while they were alive.

I thought then that she – my dear love – also must have written something on her tombstone, and ran without any fear past the half-open coffins, among the corpses and skeletons. I was now sure that I should find her immediately. I recognised her at once, without seeing her face, which was covered by the winding-sheet, standing by the grave she had just left. Her hand was stretched out toward the headstone in a graceful gesture I knew only too well. On the marble cross, where shortly before I had read:

She loved, was loved, and died.

I now saw:

*Having gone out in the rain one day
in order to deceive her beloved by meeting
another man, she caught cold and died.*

They found me the next morning at daybreak, lying on her grave unconscious.