

at 15

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She ripped the fleshy leaves between her fingers, and thought again of her mother and Mrs Van Rensberg. She would not be like Mrs Van Rensberg, a fat and earthy housekeeping woman; she would not be bitter and nagging and dissatisfied, like her mother. But then, who was she to be like? Her mind turned towards the heroines she had been offered, and discarded them. There seemed to be a gap between herself and the past.

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The group then dissolved in tears, kisses, congratulations, and alcohol. In this manner, therefore, was Martha Quest married, on a warm Thursday afternoon in the month of March, 1939, in the capital city of a British colony in the centre of the great African continent. Afterwards she could remember very little of the occasion. She remembered a wild elation, under which dragged, like a chain, a persistent misery. She remembered (when time had sorted out what was important from what was not) that someone had been saying that Hitler had seized Bohemia and Moravia, while everyone exclaimed it was impossible. She had heard the information with the feeling she must hurry, there was a terrible urgency, there was no time to waste.

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What puzzled her most was that she was a success. The last few weeks, confused, hectic, hilarious, had one thread running through it: the delight of other people in this marriage. How many had not embraced her, and with the warmest emotion! Everyone was happy about it—and why? For—and this was surely the core of the matter?—how could they be so happy, so welcoming, when they didn't know her? She, Martha, was not involved in it at all; and so in her heart she was convicting them of insincerity. They could not possibly mean it, she concluded at last, dismissing all these friends and acquaintances, the circle into which she was marrying. The whole thing was a gigantic social deception. From the moment she had said she would marry Douglas, a matter which concerned—and on this point she was determined—no one but their own two selves, some sort of machinery had been set in motion which was bound to involve more and more people. Martha could feel nothing but amazed despair at the thought of the number of people who were so happy on their account.

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She was on the point of turning over away from him, when the instinct to please turned her towards him. Love had brought her here, to lie beside this young man; love was the key to every good; love lay like a mirage through the golden gates of sex. It was not true, then nothing was true, and the beliefs of a whole generation, were illusory. They made love. She was too tired to persuade herself that she felt anything at all. Her head was by now swimming with exhaustion.

'God, but I'm tired, Matty,' he announced, rolling off her. He yawned and said with satisfaction, 'How many hours have we slept during the last fortnight?'

She did not reply. Loyalty towards love was forcing her to pretend that she was not disappointed, and that she did not—at that moment she was sick with repulsion—find him repulsive. But already that image of a lover that a woman is offered by society, and carries with her so long, had divorced itself from Douglas, like the painted picture of a stencil floating off paper in water. Because that image remained intact and unhurt, it was possible to be good-natured. It is that image which keeps so many marriages peaceable and friendly.

from The Children of Violence Doris Lessing

When Douglas returned from the office, she described the day's doings, passing over the nursing lecture as an utter waste of time, and laughing at Stella's frustrated homilies and Alice's vague determination. But Douglas, who had moments, which were becoming increasingly frequent, of remembering that he was a Government official, remarked rather officiously that Stella would get herself into trouble one of these days. It was illegal to procure abortions: that was the cold phrase he used. But at this Martha flew into an angry tirade against governments who presumed to tell women what they should do with their own bodies; it was the final insult to personal liberty. Douglas listened, frowning, and said unanswerably that the law was the law. Martha therefore retreated into herself, which meant that she became very gay, hard, and indifferent. She listened to his rather heavy insistence about what she intended to do in place of the nursing course, and understood that he was above all concerned that she should not be in the war—should not go in pursuit of the adventure he himself was quivering to find; he was even more reluctant because of his own daydreams as to certain aspects of that adventure.

He went so far, carried away by the official in him, as to make various sound remarks about the unsuitability of danger for women. She thought he must be joking; nothing is more astonishing to young women than the ease with which men, even intelligent and liberal-minded men, lapse back into that anonymous voice of authority whenever their own personal authority is threatened, saying things of a banality and a pomposity infinitely removed from their own level of thinking.

p. 407-8

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'You don't understand,' she began. But what was she to explain to Mrs Talbot? She was unable to go on. 'Oh, I do, I do!' Mrs Talbot positively wrung her hands. 'Oh, I was so happy thinking of you making Duggie so happy. If Elaine could be properly married, I think my last wish would be granted, and I'd die happy. How can you break it all up like this, Matty?' Now she was crying, and patting her eyes delicately with a fragment of silk.

'But, Mrs Talbot, I'm not properly married. I'm bored, bored, bored, you can't imagine. I can't bear it. I haven't anything in common with Douglas, and I've been unhappy all the time.' For this now seemed to her the simple truth.

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There was something essentially contradictory between the image of the revolutionary, essentially masculine, powerful and brave, and how Anton had behaved with her in bed. Yet the need in her to admire and be instructed was so great that she was on the point of telling herself: It must be my fault and not his. And yet no sooner had she reached this point of self-abnegation than her experience told her there was something wrong with Anton. And yet—here was another indisputable fact: with each man she had been with, she had been something different. Although various totally despicable because dishonest psychological pressures made her wish to say she had never enjoyed Douglas, never had pleasure with William—for both these men, from the moment she became Anton's seemed faintly distasteful and very distant—yet she knew this to be untrue. What it amounted to, then, was that she must wait for Anton to create her into something new? But after half a dozen times the honest voice of her femininity remarked that 'Anton was hopeless.' Or, to salvage her image of the man: 'We are sexually incompatible.'

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They drove in silence down to the Magistrates' Court. Anton was waiting on the pavement outside it. He was wearing a flower in his jacket, and Martha was upset when she saw it, because if she were wearing a flower it would be dishonest.

But she greeted him with a bright smile, noting that he was smiling with tenderness. But I didn't bargain for it, I didn't bargain for it at all, she thought: she was in danger of bursting into tears. The three of them went into the Court. Mr Maynard was waiting for them. Martha had not remembered that he had married her last time; she was worried that he might mention the coincidence, in case Anton might resent it. But how could he resent it—it would be so inconsistent! But she was relieved that Mr Maynard did not attempt to catch her eye, and was purely the magistrate as he asked the necessary questions. It was all over in two minutes, and Martha saw Mr Maynard turn away with a fourth person, a young man called in from the passage to act as witness, saying: 'Any more for the high jump this morning?'

Anton had his hand under her elbow. He said in the manner which had been born in the moment Martha had said she would marry him—half fatherly, yet subtly deferential: 'We must go and have a drink to celebrate.'

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Still, she had learned that one thing, that most important thing, which was that one simply had to go on, take one step after another: this process itself held the keys. And it was this process which would, as it had in the past, be bound to lead her around to that point where—asking continuously, softly, under one's breath, Where? What is it? How? What's next? Where is the man or woman who . . . she would find herself back with herself. Of course. But there are times, there are indeed times, when to put one foot soberly after another seems harder than to wrestle with devils or challenge dangers—which in retrospect seemed tame enough. She had forgotten then? Yes, her memory of the last time had blunted. She remembered everything except—how frightened she had been. Well that was a mistake, a danger in itself. She was forgetting, she had forgotten, one always forgot. . . .

p. 642

fgc

Martha looked up back at the sky, shutting out the street, and walked fast. The sky, oh the sky! and the trees in the square, whose branches moving in gentle air sent her messages of such joy, such peace, till she cried, Oh trees, I love you, and sky I love you! and the cloud up there, so absurd, so sweet, so softly, whitely, deliciously lolling up there in blue air, she wished to take it in her arms and kiss it. Oh Lord! she prayed, Let me keep this, let me not lose it, oh, how could I have borne it all these years, all this life, being dead and asleep and not seeing, seeing nothing; for now everything was so much there, present, existing in an effulgence of delight, offering themselves to her, till she felt they were extensions of her and she of them, or at least, their joy and hers sang together, so that she felt they might almost cry out Martha! Martha! for happiness, because she was seeing them, feeling them again after so long an absence from them.

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fgc

at 60

Her mind seemed to be a thin light texture through which other textures, feelings, sensations kept passing. Oh, it had been long before the voyage to England . . . suddenly Martha was in a room she had forgotten, looking at enormous people, giants, engaged in . . . yes, she had been a child, she had felt this as a tiny child, looking at grown-up people, as they sat around a table, dressed in clothes that made them seem like her dolls, talking and smiling to each other with put-on false smiles and looks. For they did not mean what they said. They were afraid of each other, or at least had to placate each other: the small child had called this activity 'lies'. She had watched (how old? Small enough for a knee to seem large and dangerous, like a horse's trampling legs), and judged these giants as cowards and liars, engaged—incredibly—in meaningless activities and rituals of dressing and undressing and eating and talking, and their fear of each other, their wariness, was so great that two of them could not meet without going stiffly on guard and stretching their mouths and making movements which said: I won't hurt you if you won't hurt me—look, I'm so nice and kind, don't hurt me. . . . Martha had seen all this, understood it, had even said to herself in an anguish of fear that she would be swallowed up: Don't let yourself be sucked in, remember, remember, remember—but she had not remembered, she had been sucked in, she had become a liar and coward like the rest.

Martha went bitterly for the wasted years.

p. 541

fgc

Whole areas of Martha's life had slipped away. . . . What had the house been like? It had gone. A shabby old grass-thatched house on a hill: but she could not see it. And inside? All gone. Even her bedroom which had once been her place, her refuge, and where she had known every brush-mark on the wall, and how the separate strands of grass had glistened when the lamps were brought in. And after that, she had been married. She had lived in different places with Douglas Knowell. She had had a large house. She had had a daughter, Caroline had been a pretty small girl. She was now, what? Twelve? But that wasn't possible. And that long period (or it seemed so at the time) when she had been such an active busy communist and then an active and busy social person—what was left of it all? Anton. She could not remember the rooms where she had lived with Anton. Thomas. She could not remember his voice, could not hear it. What came back from Thomas was—the strong smell of fresh wet greenery, growth, a sound of strong rain hitting dust, the sun on a drenched tree.

Her father's long illness; her mother—ah yes, here it was, and she knew it. She had been blocking off the pain, and had blocked off half of her life with it. Her memory had gone. Well, almost.

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fgc

And besides, what was real in her, underneath these metamorphoses of style or shape or—even, apparently—personality, remained and intensified. The continuity of Martha now was in a determination to survive—
. . . . Martha was holding herself together—like everybody else. She was a lighthouse of watchfulness; she was a being totally on the defensive. This was her reality, not the 'pretty', or 'attractive' Martha Hesse, a blondish, dark-eyed young woman who smiled back at her from the mirror where she was becomingly set off in pink cotton that showed a dark angle of shadow in the angle of her hips.

p. 13

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Here Martha came most afternoons and some evenings to make love, or simply to turn a key on herself and be alone. She had complained that her life had consisted of a dozen rooms, each self-contained, that she was wearing into a frazzle of shrill nerves in the effort of carrying herself, each time a whole, from one 'room' to the other. But adding a new room to her house had ended the division. From this centre she now lived—a loft of aromatic wood from whose crooked window could be seen only sky and the boughs of trees, above a brick floor hissing sweetly from the slow drippings and wellings from a hundred growing plants, in a shed whose wooden walls grew from lawns where the swinging arc of a water-sprayer flung rainbows all day long, although, being January, it rained most afternoons.

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After all, they had been married for four years. According to their lights they had nothing to reproach themselves with. It had almost been an arranged marriage, could almost be described as a marriage of convenience. Here they sat after four years of it, and at least they had given each other space to find consolation, they had not quarrelled—not destructively, at least; had not done each other damage. Martha had behaved well, by waiting until Anton was naturalised; Anton had behaved well by taking it for granted that she would behave well. They had both of them behaved in what both would describe as a civilised way. So while they were not married, nor ever had been, there was nothing to be ashamed of. And they felt for each other a kind of dry, patient compassion—well, that was something.

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The Children of Violence
Doris Lessing

mq Martha Quest
pm A Proper Marriage
rs A Ripple from the Storm
L Landlocked
fgc The Four-Gated City

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