

WHEN LAST IN LONDON

By Kathleen
MacMahon

By Kathleen
MacMahon

A strange thing happened when I was last in London, something I haven't yet mentioned to anybody. I need to find a way of explaining it to myself before I can tell anyone else. I'm hoping it might help to set it down on paper.

It had been three years since I'd been in the city. Normally I would be over and back from Dublin at least once a month, but Covid had put a stop to all that. We'd been managing fine using online conferencing, so I had mixed feelings about resuming the commute.

I found the travel an ordeal – impatient with all the queuing, resentful of emptying my handbag for airport security – I missed the comfort of my couch. The proximity of so many other people was distressing to me. Wedged into the middle seat on the plane, I recoiled from touching my neighbours. I kept my mask on during the flight.

Arriving in London, I found the airport inordinately noisy. I made my way to the Tube station, grateful for the courtesy of Londoners, which I always find touching. The smell in the station was hot and dry, the train more jangly than I remembered, or maybe it was just my nerves. As soon as we pulled out of the station, I took out my make-up bag and started touching up my

face, starting with the bags under my eyes.

"Is that how it's done?" asked the man sitting opposite me. "I've always wondered."

The man was older than me – he looked to be in his early fifties. He was

smartly dressed in a three-piece suit, with amused brown eyes and the floppy hair so typical of Englishmen. For some reason he put me in mind of Andrew Morgan, who was a classmate of mine when I was a postgrad at the LSE. It could have been the accent, or the brown eyes, or maybe it was just the guileless way he was watching me, with no attempt to disguise his interest.

I suddenly had Andrew's voice in my ear, Andrew's sweet, round face peering round the half-open door of my room in college. A memory of Andrew coming up behind me in the library to look over my shoulder at the letter I was writing.

"Hey," I'd said, and moved to cover the page with my arm.

I was annoyed that he'd tried to see what I was writing, and I made no attempt to hide my annoyance because I knew that Andrew was in love with me. The fact that I wasn't in love with him gave me licence to be cruel to him.

I was young enough then to think that love could be squandered, even scorned. Poor Andrew deserved better than me.

For several years after we left college, I thought

of him often and felt bad whenever I did. I found myself wishing I'd been kinder to him, but the years went by and the shame dissipated, and I thought of him less and less. In the last decade, I'd remembered him only rarely and fleetingly.

I'd made no attempt to track him down on social media, which made it all the more remarkable that he occupied my mind so intensely on the journey from Heathrow to Earl's Court. I had a physical awareness of him, the way you sometimes wake in the night with a physical awareness of someone you've just been dreaming about. (I had a passionate dream about Keir Starmer once and can never be parted from the intimate knowledge I now have of him.)

The Andrew in my daydream was all grown up, with a lovely wife and a good job somewhere. We had encountered each other – somewhere – and entered into a passionate affair.

I didn't bother filling in any of the boring details. I'd just been liberated from a series of long Covid lockdowns – months of working from home and home schooling and endlessly emptying the dishwasher – which may explain why I slipped into the affair as eagerly as someone slipping into a cool pool on a hot day. It was so real to me that I could smell the laundry detergent from his freshly ironed shirt as I leaned in to greet him. I could feel the sticky, freshly shaved smoothness of his cheek on my lips as I kissed him. I was so deeply immersed in my dream of him that it

did not seem at all strange to me to step off the train and find him standing there on the platform in front of me.

I should mention at this point that I don't believe in premonitions. My sister, Claire, is a great woman for them. She predicts with blithe certainty the gender of people's babies, the fate of their marriages, their manner of

death. She's wrong at least 50% of the time by my reckoning, but she claims only her victories. She reminds me of our father, who would sit in front of *Mastermind* when we were children and make a tick in the margin of his newspaper for every question he answered correctly, a split second after the contestant had already answered.

"What did I tell you?" said Claire, when my first baby was a girl. When our father drove his car into the back of a bin truck and crushed his rib cage, Claire was all-knowing. "I warned you something like that was going to happen," she said. "I had a feeling about it."

"That's not a feeling," I told her. "It's a perfectly logical assumption. He's an appalling driver."

I'm the typical middle child. All my life I've defined myself as the sensible one in the family. I'm the voice of reason, which is why I choose to recount what happened next as a sequence of events rather than event and consequence.

"Andrew!" I said. "Sarah!" He was amazed to see me, and touchingly pleased. "I can't believe it."

He was more handsome than he'd been as a young man, with sweet, sad lines around his eyes that softened the guilelessness I had once found so uncool. His face was pale and serious where once it had been pink and shining with optimism. He was not my type, back then, but the fault was all mine. It's only now that I can see the appeal of a good man.

"Gosh," he said, as only he would. There was a time when I would have held this against him, but all was forgiven now. "How long has it been?" He ran a hand through his hair and left

it there for a moment. He was wearing a grey business suit, with a white shirt – the top two buttons were undone – and no tie. I leaned in to kiss him, placing a hand on his shoulder with all the weight of an old love. The other

hand I slipped between his shirt and his jacket, savouring the delicious liberty I was taking with his life.

I didn't have time to examine my motives, because a sudden gust of warm air rushed at us from the mouth of the tunnel.

"That's my train," he said, turning to look at its approach.

Already, the doors were opening. There was a great rush of people getting off, people getting on. "We should..."

"Shush," I whispered, into his ear, and the kiss I gave him was a kiss straight out of my daydream.

Afterwards, I laid my hand with great drama on the side of his face and stared into his eyes before turning away and racing up the stairs of the Tube station before he could try to stop me.

I had no intention of exchanging numbers, no desire to arrange a meeting in some dark English pub where our voices would be peppered with the sounds of a fruit machine. I was keen to avoid any sequel to our meeting, and in so doing preserve it from the merciless rot of social media where our lives are relentlessly exposed to each other and lose all their mystery, where chance and coincidence – the railway sidings of life – are heedlessly eliminated.

When I read, several months later in an alumni newsletter, that Andrew had died shortly after I met him (while on holiday in France, was all they said), I was glad that I had, albeit belatedly and for the briefest time, returned his love.

★ Kathleen MacMahon's new novel, *The Home Scar* (Sandy Cove, £13.99), is published on Thursday



I was young enough to think that love could be squandered – or even scorned