

LOVE



ANGELA CARTER



A KING PENGUIN

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LOVE

Angela Carter was born in 1940; she published her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, in 1965 and was immediately recognized as one of Britain's most original and disturbing writers. Since then, she has written seven other novels, three collections of short stories, two books of nonfiction, a translation of the fairy tales of Charles Perrault, and numerous poems and pieces of journalism. She is the author of the screenplay for *The Company of Wolves*, a fantasy film; a collection of her radio scripts was published in England in 1985. Her *Saints and Strangers*, *The Bloody Chamber*, *Fireworks*, and *Heroes and Villains* are also available from Penguin. Carter lives in London but frequently teaches in the United States, most recently at the University of Texas and at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

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One day, Annabel saw the sun and moon in the sky at the same time. The sight filled her with a terror which entirely consumed her and did not leave her until the night closed in catastrophe for she had no instinct for self-preservation if she was confronted by ambiguities.

It had happened as she walked home through the park. In the system of correspondences by which she interpreted the world around her, this park had a special significance and she walked along its overgrown paths with nervous pleasure, especially in certain yellow, tarnished lights of winter when the trees were bare and the sun, as it set, rimmed the branches with cold fire. An eighteenth-century landscape gardener planned the park to surround a mansion which had been pulled down long ago and now the once harmonious artificial wilderness, randomly dishevelled by time, spread its green tangles across the high shoulder of a hill only a stone's throw from a busy road that ran through the city dockland. All that remained of the former mansion were a few architectural accessories now the property of the city museum. There was a stable built on the lines of a miniature Parthenon, housing for Houyhnhnms rather than natural horses; the pillared portico, especially effective under the light of a full moon, never to be entered again by any horse, functioned only as a pure piece of design, a focal point in the green composition on the south side of the hill where Annabel

rarely ventured for serenity bored her and the Mediterranean aspect of this part of the park held no excitements for her. She preferred the Gothic north, where an ivy-covered tower with leaded ogive windows skulked among the trees. Both these pretty whimsies were kept securely locked for fear of the despoliation of vandals but their presence still performed its original role, transforming the park into a premeditated theatre where the romantic imagination could act out any performance it chose amongst settings of classic harmony or crabbed quaintness. And the magic strangeness of the park was enhanced by its curious silence. Footfalls fell softly on the long grass and few birds sang there, but the presence all around of the sprawling, turbulent city, however muffled its noises, lent such haunted, breathless quiet an unnatural quality.

The park maintained only a single, still impressive entrance, a massive pair of wrought-iron gates decorated with cherubs, masks of beasts, stylized reptiles and spearheads from which the gilding flaked, but these gates were never either open or closed. They hung always a little ajar and drooped from their hinges with age; they served a function no longer for all the railings round the park were gone long ago and access everywhere was free and easy. The park was on such high ground it seemed to hang in the air above a vast, misty model of a city and those who walked through it always felt excessively exposed to the weather. At times, all seemed nothing but a playground for the winds and, at others, an immense drain for all the rain the heavens could pour forth.

Annabel went through the park in a season of high winds and lurid weather, early one winter's evening, and happened to look up at the sky.

On her right, she saw the sun shining down on the district of terraces and crescents where she lived while, on her left, above the spires and skyscrapers of the city itself, the rising moon hung motionless in a rift of absolute night. Though one was setting while the other rose, both sun and moon gave forth an equal brilliance so the heavens contained two contrary states at once.

Annabel gazed upwards, appalled to see such a dreadful rebellion of the familiar. There was nothing in her mythology to help her resolve this conflict and, all at once, she felt herself the helpless pivot of the entire universe as if sun, moon, stars and all the hosts of the sky span round upon herself, their volitionless axle.

At that, she bolted from the path through the long grass, seeking cover from the sky. Wholly at the mercy of the elements, she lurched and zig-zagged and her movements were so erratic, apparently at the whim of the roaring winds, and her colours so ill-defined, blurred by the approaching dusk, that she might herself have been no more than an emanation of the place or time of year.

At the crest of the hill, she flung up her hands in a furious gesture of surrender and pitched herself sideways off the path, concealing herself behind a clump of gorse where she lay moaning and breathless for a few moments. The wind tied strands of her hair to spikes of gorse and thus confirmed her intuition that she should not budge one inch until the dreadful, ambiguous hour resolved itself entirely to night. So there she stayed, a mad girl plastered in fear and trembling against a thorn bush suffering an anguish which also visited her when pressed just as close to the blond flesh of the young husband who slept beside her and did not know her dreams, although he was a beautiful boy whom anybody else would have thought well worth the effort of loving.

She suffered from nightmares too terrible to reveal to him, especially since he himself was often the principal actor in them and appeared in many hideous dream disguises. Sometimes, during the day, she stopped, startled, before some familiar object because it seemed to have just changed its form back to the one she remembered after a brief, private period impersonating something quite strange, for she had the capacity for changing the appearance of the real world which is the price paid by those who take too subjective a view of it. All she apprehended through her senses she took only as objects for interpretation in the expressionist style and she saw, in everyday things, a world of

mythic, fearful shapes of whose existence she was convinced although she never spoke of it to anyone; nor had she ever suspected that everyday, sensuous human practice might shape the real world. When she did discover that such a thing was possible, it proved the beginning of the end for her for how could she possess any notion of the ordinary?

Her brother-in-law once gave her a set of pornographic photographs. She accepted the gift absently, without doing him the courtesy of investigating the complex motives behind it, and she examined the pictures one by one with a certain impersonal curiosity. A glum, painted young woman, the principal actress (torso and legs sheathed in black leather, sex exposed) eyed the camera indifferently as though it were no business of hers she was blocked at every orifice; she went about her obscene business with neither relish nor disgust, rather with the abstract precision of the geometrician so that these stark juxtapositions of genitalia, the antithesis of the erotic, were cold as Russia when nights are coldest there and possessed chiefly the power to affront. Annabel, comforted and reassured by these indifferent arrangements of bizarre intersecting lines, became convinced they told a true story. For herself, all she wanted in life was a bland, white, motionless face like that of the photographic whore so she could live a quiet life behind it, because she was so often terrified when the pictures around her began to move, as she thought, of their own accord and she could not control them.

So these photographs were cards in her private tarot pack and signified love.

As she waited for the sun to set, she had ample time to refresh and embellish her initial terror and was finally seized with the conviction that this night, of all nights, it would never disappear at all but lie stranded for ever above the horizon so she would have to stay nailed to the hillside. At these times, she thought of her husband as a place of safety although, when she was face to face with him, she could find no means of telling him her fears since his brother was her only intermediary between her private experience and the common one; and, this time, it was

he who rescued her so she learned to trust him a little more.

But when she first met the boy who became her brother-in-law, he frightened her more than anything had done until that date.

Before they were married, when she was living with Lee, who was then a student, Lee came home from a lecture one February afternoon to find his brother had returned from North Africa unannounced. The newcomer sat on the floor at right angles to the wall in the recesses of a black, hooded, Tunisian cloak which concealed every part of him but for long fingers which drummed restlessly against his knee. On the other side of the room, Annabel sat in a similar position, shielding her face with her hair. An air of mutual mistrust filled the room. Lee dropped a string bag containing groceries on the floor and went to feed the dying fire.

'Hi, Alyosha,' said Buzz.

Lee knelt beside him to hug and kiss him.

'I have a dose,' enunciated Buzz with precision.

'You want to eat?'

Buzz padded after Lee into the adjoining kitchen and, grasping him from behind, pressed his fingertips against the base of Lee's throat until Lee went limp.

'I don't like her,' said Buzz and released him.

When Lee could speak, he said: 'Try that unarmed combat stuff on me again and I'll smash you against the fucking wall.'

'Bad . . .' said Buzz effortfully . . . 'vibes . . .'

Lee shrugged and broke eggs into a pan of hot fat.

'But I don't like her!' wailed Buzz childishly. He wound the cloak round himself to hide. 'And you're knocking her off, aren't you; you're screwing her all night.'

Lee menaced him briefly with the breadknife and he fell back, whimpering, for knives, his favourite weapon, impressed him horribly when they were turned against him. He crouched on the floor like a dog to eat his food in the tent of the black cape and Annabel still sat where they had left her, in the dark.

'That's my brother,' said Lee pleasantly.

'What's wrong with him?'

‘Gonorrhoea.’

‘Pardon?’

‘A venereal disease,’ explained Lee.

‘Apart from that.’

‘He’s a freak.’

She appeared to consider this gravely for a few minutes. Then she said: ‘Come here.’

She embraced Lee with such unexpected passion he started to shiver, murmuring her name and running his hands over her body. As they toppled sideways to the floor, the lights in the room flashed on and Buzz’s shadow fell over them like that of an avenging angel for he spread out his arms so the folds of the cloak made wings. He attacked them both impartially and, catching Lee unprepared, soon succeeded in subduing him; when he adopted the traditional pose of the victor, his knee in Lee’s belly, he snarled:

‘Don’t ever let me catch you at it again!’

But time passed and Buzz and Annabel became, in a sense, accomplices and then they left Lee out of their plottings for he understood neither of them, although he loved them both.

Buzz never went out without a camera; that night of January, when he found her on the hill, he took several photographs of her without her knowledge as soon as he saw her angular, familiar body stretched out against the bush in the strange light. Then he knelt beside her without speaking till there was nothing but honest moonlight before he led her home to the flat in a Victorian square, where they all three lived together. She stood in the dark porch fumbling for her latch-key with chilly fingers stiff with fright which could not find their way about the satchel which also contained her sketchbooks and a few things, a model soldier, three tubes of white gouache and a bar of chocolate, which she had stolen that day at lunchtime. Buzz dug into the bag and found her key, took the chocolate bar, kissed her cheek and ran off for he had arranged a party in the flat that night and had some preparatory business to do. He liked organizing parties for he always hoped something terrible would happen

when so many people intersected upon one another. He was, as usual, in a state of suppressed nervous excitement.

In their room, Lee lay face down on the carpet in front of the fire, perhaps asleep. The walls round him were painted a very dark green and from this background emerged all the dreary paraphernalia of romanticism, landscapes of forests, jungles and ruins inhabited by gorillas, trees with breasts, winged men with pig faces and women whose heads were skulls. An enormous bedstead of dull since rarely polished brass, spread with figured Indian cotton, occupied the centre of the room which was large and high but so full of bulky furniture in dark woods (chairs, sofas, bookcases, sideboards, a round mahogany table covered with a fringed, red plush cloth, a screen covered with time-browned scraps) that one had to move around the room very carefully for fear of tripping over things. Heavy velvet curtains hung at the windows and puffed blue dust at a touch; a light powder of dust covered everything. On the mantelpiece stood the skull of a horse amongst a clutter of small objects such as clockwork toys, stones of many shapes and various bottles and jars.

All this heterogeneous collection seemed to throb with a mute, inscrutable, symbolic life; everything Annabel gathered around her evoked correspondences in her mind so all these were the palpable evidence of her own secrets and the room expressed a hermetic spiritual avarice. In her way, she was a miser. In this oppressive room, Lee was as out of place as a goatherd's son trapped in a witch's house for he always took about with him a peasant or rustic breath of open air. He lay on the carpet and traced the threadbare warp with his finger. She moved almost silently but he heard her come in and raised his head. His eyes were of the clearest, most beautiful, most intense blue though always rimmed with reddish inflammation. He put out his hand and caught hold of one of her naked feet, which were both caked with damp earth from the hillside.

'Trampling in graves again,' he said for he took her other-worldliness lightly. 'Oh, my duck, you'll catch your death.'

The local evening newspaper drifted apart leaf from leaf in the draught caused by Annabel's entrance. Lee trapped the paper and pointed out a blurred photograph.

'Joanne. Joanne Davis. She's in my form at school. I teach her. Sweet Jesus, can you credit it?'

He was a schoolteacher for a living and worked in a comprehensive school. His pupil was a buxom blonde who wore a bikini with a sash over her bosom identifying her as the winner of a minor beauty contest. She revealed her teeth in a smile as brilliantly artificial as those of acrobats.

'She has no academic bent,' said Lee. 'Sixteen, she is. I'm an old man to her. I'm Mr Collins and sometimes even "sir".'

He was twenty-four, old enough for this to sadden him, but Annabel indifferently stirred the paper with her toes. She was so full of the terror of the park she could barely think of anything else and she rehearsed the simple sentence carefully before she asked him if supper was ready so that no tremor in her voice should betray her agitation. He nodded and abandoned the attempt to chat with her; they did not speak to one another, much. She evaded his hands and padded out into the kitchen to inspect the food he had prepared in case it contained snakes and spiders while Lee rose and found her antique lace tablecloth in the drawer of an enormous sideboard which was decorated with small, carved lions' heads with brass rings in their noses. He did not hear her return but saw her suddenly materialize in the dusty surface of the sideboard mirror, which was subtly warped, so her face looked as if it were reflected in water. All was as it should be in the kitchen and she gave him a smile of such unexpected sweetness that he turned, put his arms around her and hid his face in her hair, for he was having an affair with another woman, as was only to be expected.

'What did you do today, love?'

'I drew the model,' she said indifferently.

Her apparent indifference to the world outside her own immediate perceptions had ceased to hurt Lee but never failed to bewilder him for he always tried to be as happy as he could,

himself. They had lived together for three years but still, when he was with Annabel, Lee was like a lone explorer in an unknown country without a map to guide him. Genuine explorers rarely smile for what they have undergone wipes the smiles from their faces for good; Lee was not yet quite ready to join that select and aristocratic company but he was already very much changed from what he had been and his marvellous smile was a far less frequent event than in the days before he met her, for until then he had been perfectly free.

This freedom had been the result of an unusual combination of circumstances. Neither he nor his brother carried through life the name he had been born with. Lee had undergone three changes of forename, from Michael to Leon to his own choice of diminutive borrowed from some now forgotten Saturday-morning cinema Western, Lee, and he arrogantly retained the last name into adult life for he was not ashamed of his romanticism. The aunt who cared for both of the boys changed his name to Leon, for Trotsky. She was a remarkable woman, a canteen cook and shop steward who worked her fingers to the bone to support the two boys and inculcated in them a sense of pride and a certain critical severity which, in adulthood, they both expressed sufficiently in their separate ways, though neither in a way of which their aunt would have approved.

Buzz, however, had renamed himself. At four years old, he selected this mysterious monosyllable from the credits of a television cartoon film and after that he insisted it was his own name and his only name; he refused to answer to any other and so he soon acquired it permanently. He said he liked the word because it hung in the air for a long time after him but Lee guessed he liked the persistent irritation of the sound. Their aunt changed their original surname to her own by deed poll after their mother, her sister, forfeited her social personality in such a spectacular manner that she became a legend in the neighbourhood where they lived.

On Empire Day at the primary school which Lee attended when he was a small child, there was an annual festival with a

display of flags, patriotic tableaux and country dancing. This celebration reached its climax when a selection of infants filed on to the playground in their best clothes with, attached by string, a card bearing a single letter around each neck so that, assembled in a line, they spelled out in total the motto of the school, a Kantian imperative: DO RIGHT BECAUSE IT IS RIGHT. Upon a blowing day in June, in his sixth year, Lee carried the letter S when his mother, naked and painted all over with cabbalistic signs, burst into the crowded playground and fell writhing and weeping on the asphalt before him.

When Lee attained the age of reason and acquired his aunt's pride, he was glad his mother had gone mad in style. There could be no mistaking her intention nor could her behaviour be explained in any other terms than the onset of a spectacular psychosis in the grand, traditional style of the old-fashioned Bedlamite. She progressed to unreason via no neurotic back alleyway nor let any slow night of silence and darkness descend upon her; she chose the high road, operatically stripping off her clothes and screaming to the morning: 'I am the whore of Babylon.' His aunt took him to visit her in hospital from time to time but she was beyond recall and failed to recognize them as if they had been, at the best of times, chance and unmemorable acquaintances. So, soon after they went to live with their aunt, she saw the logic of the child when the younger brother insisted on changing his name. She changed Michael's for him as well and blotted out the family name with her own.

In the street where the brothers lived with their aunt during their childhood, it always seemed to be Sunday afternoon. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find such streets, though they used to exist in large numbers in all our great cities – those quiet terraces of artisans' dwellings where the sunlight falls on cracked paving stones and smoky brick with a peculiar sweetness and the winds seem never chill nor boisterous. In summer, they hang protectors of faded canvas over the front doors to prevent the sun from peeling off still more of paint blistered already by suns of many summers and old men sit outside in shirtsleeves on

kitchen chairs, as if put out to air upon the pavement. On the low window ledges, one might find, here, a pie set out to cool or a jelly to set, there, a dreaming cat; the windows themselves are hung with half-curtains of coarse lace or display dusty, unlikelike plants in green glazed pots and plaster Alsatian dogs, though now and then one catches glimpses of those tiny, brown front rooms flickering in the light of coal fires – rooms which, in winter, seem to promise all the warmth in the world. A gentle, respectable serenity pervades these scenes of urban pastorate. In such a street, behind scalloped lace, their aunt ferociously refused to submit to cancer in the style of a revolutionary, in a room full of yellowing pamphlets. It took her a whole, stifling, oppressive summer to die but all the time she died magnificently. That autumn, Lee went away to university and Buzz left London with him. The following year, the GLC pulled their old street down so all they had left was a few memories.

The brothers lived together in the university town. Lee was like a ploughboy and Buzz like a nightbird; Lee was sentimental while Buzz was malign; Lee's sensuality was equalled only by Buzz's perversity but they stayed together because they were alone in a world with which both felt themselves subtly at variance. Both walked warily, with the marvellous, collected walk of gunfighters of the Old West, and they were quick to take offence. They had the air of visitors who do not intend to stay long. Their mother's madness, their orphaned state, their aunt's politics and their arbitrary identity formed in both a savage detachment for they found such detachment necessary to maintain their precarious autonomy. From earliest childhood, they were accustomed to fighting, though Lee was better at it.

Lee was an honest orphan; his father had been a railwayman killed in the course of duty but after her husband's death, the wife had gone on the game and Buzz was fathered by an American serviceman who left behind him nothing but a crude, silver, finger-ring decorated with a skull and crossbones. Buzz created an authentic savage from this shadow. He became convinced the man had been an American Indian and claimed as

proof his own straight, coarse, sooty hair, high cheekbones and sallow complexion. Sometimes the tribe he favoured most were the Apaches but, in less aggressive moods, he thought he might be a Mohawk since he had no fear at all of heights and often walked on roofs. Lee went to a grammar school but Buzz went to a secondary modern school. There, with a passionate stubbornness that earned his brother's unwilling respect, he steadfastly refused to learn anything useful.

He worked sporadically in factories, down at the docks or else serving or washing up in cafés. At the times he was not working, he lived off his brother and sometimes stole. He was taller than Lee and dressed himself in rags. He had neither talents nor aptitudes, only a disconcertingly sharp intelligence and a merciless self-absorption. He had long, thin hands as if expressly formed for picking and stealing and he bit his nails down to the half-moon. He lived at a conscious pitch of melodrama; once, filling out a form for some job or other he never achieved, he wrote down against the space marked: INTERESTS, the two words, sex and death.

‘Don’t let’s exaggerate,’ said Lee gently.

Lee looked like Billy Budd, or a worker hero of the Soviets, or a boy in a book by Jack London. He was of medium height and sturdy build; his eyes were blue and looked like the eyes of a seafarer partly because of the persistent slight reddening of the rims due to a chronic slum-child infection he did not shake off as he grew up. His hair was the colour of hay, his complexion fresh and only the lack of a front tooth took away the suspicion he might be simple-minded for it gave his gapped but dazzling smile a certain ambiguity. Like most people who happen to be born with a degree of physical beauty, he had become self-conscious very young in life and so profoundly aware of the effect of his remarkable appearance on other people that, by the age of twenty, he gave the impression of perfect naturalness, utter spontaneity and entire warmth of heart. ‘Alyosha,’ said Buzz with contemptuous admiration. ‘Bloody Alyosha.’

Buzz’s conversation was composed of unnerving silences inter-