

Everything and Nothing

by Alison Earls

Nothing and everything. That's what I remember.

In those days when we talked well past time, it was all about the most important things. And now I can't recall a topic, a single subject. It's all well to say that we spoke of hopes and dreams, aspirations, life — all those angst-ridden topics we treasured with our youth and potential, but you'd think there would be one conversation that I could recall. One exchange on our philosophies. One secret revelation told in the darkness of the earliest time of morning.

But I have nothing.

Some trivial interactions, yes. The first hint of flirtation. The last. The awkward stuttering end. But all those hours, those soul-baring hours ... a hollow in my memory. I wish that you could tell me. I wish that you could look at me again the way you did and that it would flood back. But the void in between us now is so much more than those hazy hours. So I have to smile at life and its way of hiccupping us all through until our end and I have to hold the loveliest moments inside me like an empty shell. No substance, just a glowing skin of sweet possibility that never saw the light of day.

Joe thought of Evelyn.

Walt of Charley.

Annabelle dreamt of Paolo in an autumn in Cordoba.

Everyone who stayed at Mrs Jackanoe's guest house in Room 17 and found the note, thought back to a time ... a person ... and forgot to wonder who had inked the words so expressively onto the yellowing page.

Sometimes the guest was staying alone, sometimes with a partner — but the person sleeping alongside them was never the one they dreamt of during their night in Room 17. Once they had read the note.

Mrs Jackanoe could always tell which person had read it — for, each time, there was only one. She could see the quiet sipping of tea over breakfast, she noticed when the guest stared through the window but couldn't see the tree or the street outside. There was a distracted quality in every person that played out in different ways. Sometimes it would last no longer than a slice of toast. And others would leave after several days, still pensive and preoccupied. But there was always one. One thoughtful person. One person steeped in memories. One lost for a time in a kind of personal regret.

Mrs Jackanoe had no wish to cause trouble. She didn't expect that reading the note would ever lead anyone to change their current circumstances. But she left it in the drawer beside the bed in the room where she had found it and watched the people float back to a time that could bloom only in their embellished memories.

One day she decided to display the relic. She bought a pretty carved wooden frame and placed the note inside. Then she hung it on the wall in Room 17 beside the mahogany cupboard. That afternoon a Mr and Mrs Geraldon from Lincoln, Nebraska arrived for a two day visit.

"Room 17's the only one left," Mrs Jackanoe said. "There's a big concert on this weekend — bands from all over the district in a competition at the town hall."

"Oh, I'm sure Room 17's lovely," Mrs Geraldon replied and took the keys to lead her husband up the stairs.

The next morning, the Geraldons came down for breakfast. They ordered scrambled eggs and wholewheat toast and strong coffee with cream on the side. When Mrs Jackanoe brought the toast, Mrs Geraldon smiled up at her. "We read that lovely piece you have in the room. That letter or whatever it is." She glanced at her husband. He raised an eyebrow and took a piece of toast. "Eddie's not so much into the romantic stuff now," she said, not solely with the jovial tone she had hoped for, "but I thought it was sweet. So sweet. Who wrote it? I'm sure there's a story there."

"I'm sure there is," said Mrs Jackanoe. "But I don't know it. It was in that room when I bought the place. I've never known a thing about the note ... except what it says."

"Oh, what a shame," said Mrs Geraldon. "I'd love to know who she was, and who he was and what happened. But I bet everybody says that."

The hostess smiled and went to collect the eggs from the kitchen. Nobody had said that. No one who'd stayed in that room over all the years she'd been there.

The next week, a woman, Janet Franck, booked in and Mrs Jackanoe put her in Room 17. She arrived late, stopping just to break a long journey home from a conference. Mrs Jackanoe gave her some tea and grilled cheese sandwiches — even though the kitchen had already closed — and showed her the bathroom before she left her guest to get a good night's sleep.

The next day, just as the night porter was packing up and the landlady was coming on duty, Janet Franck appeared at the desk with her bag and the room keys.

"Thanks so much again for the food last night. I thought that having cooked cheese so late would make me dream — my Granny always said it would — but I slept right through. Not a single thought in my head until my alarm went off this morning," she said.

"No trouble," replied Mrs Jackanoe, as she waved to Peter, the night man, disappearing through the front door. "My mother used to say the same. Never had much trouble with it myself." She passed the bill to her guest and dealt with the payment.

"Oh, where did you get that diary note on the wall ?... it's like something out of Jane Austen. You know, all that stuff about love gone wrong, soulmates destined not to be together. I'm a sucker for romantic novels." Janet smiled with confessional self-deprecation.

"It was in the room when I bought the place — not sure where it's from or anything, but people seem to like it," Mrs Jackanoe replied and bid her guest goodbye before tending to the others who had settled in the dining room.

There was a couple from down south who stayed for a week.

A man visiting his local relatives.

Even her regulars, John and Annie Leeson, who stayed once or twice a year. All stayed in Room 17 over the next few weeks and not a one dawdled while their knife dripped honey back into the jar or let a subtle frown of reflection play for too long on their forehead. If they looked out of the window, they saw the poplar tree. If they stirred their coffee, they did it briskly and effectively. If they considered something, it was only the menu or the tourism pamphlets highlighting spots of interest in the local area. Some commented on the framed piece of writing in the room, others didn't. But their moods seemed to be affected only by surroundings, companions or present circumstances and not by anything that had invisibly fluttered back into a startled stirring consciousness.

After six weeks of allowing it to hang as public decoration, Mrs Jackanoe took the note down and released it from the frame. She stood at the bedside table in Room 17 and opened the drawer to slip the note back inside. But before she did, she read the words again — just as she had when she had first discovered the crumpled page in the quiet of the empty room. And she stood for a moment with her eyes towards the window but glazed with nostalgia.

She thought of the light of long summer evenings. Of sixteen and seventeen. She thought of a man, a young shy man that had been lost behind her years of busy living. She couldn't see his face too clearly but she could feel the way that he had looked at her. And she almost remembered his sweet musky scent as they had stood so close. So close but never close enough. Never touching. Barely talking. But with sweet possibility.

Thoughts that she had never shared. Secrets of what might been. The private hopes of a young dreamer that once had nestled like treasures waiting to be discovered.

Moments so real but never truly realised.

She sighed and let her mind hold onto them for just a little longer. While she remembered how it felt to be so full.

So full of everything and nothing.

