Reared on a large farm in Rhodesia, Doris Lessing used her childhood, youthful marriage, and Communist organizing in Africa as material for her early stories and novels—*The Grass Is Singing* and the five novels of the Martha Quest series. In 1949 she moved to London, the locale of most of the action in her magnificent *The Golden Notebook* and *Four-Gated City*. Some of her recent fiction moves away from realism into science fiction, mysticism, and madness, but her most recent fiction, including *The Good Terrorist* and *The Fifth Child*, are again stories of social realism. Her *Golden Notebook*, long but worth the effort, is one of the most all-encompassing novels written since the Second World War, exploring political, social, and emotional realities. It is like a crash course in modernism and modern history.

"How I Finally Lost My Heart" sounds like the title of what Lessing calls "woman's magazine" fiction. There are dreadful clichés about love throughout the story: "better to have loved and lost..."; carrying "our... hearts in our hands..."; "heart-less..."; and losing your heart. But Lessing doesn't pander to the reader's fantasies about love; quite the opposite. The story *deconstructs* the language and attitudes of romantic love.

Compare "How I Finally Lost My Heart" to Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love."

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**How I Finally Lost My Heart**

*Doris Lessing*

It would be easy to say that I picked up a knife, slit open my side, took my heart out, and threw it away; but unfortunately it wasn't as easy as that. Not that I, like everyone else, had not often wanted to do it. No, it happened differently, and not as I expected.
It was just after I had had a lunch and a tea with two different men. My lunch partner I had lived with for (more or less) four and seven-twelfths years. When he left me for new pastures, I spent two years, or was it three, half dead, and my heart was a stone, impossible to carry about, considering all the other things weighting on one. Then I slowly, and with difficulty, got free, because my heart cherished a thousand adhesions to my first love—though from another point of view he could be legitimately described as either my second real love (my father being the first) or my third (my brother intervening).

As the folk song has it:

I have loved but three men in my life,
My father, my brother, and the man that took my life.

But if one were going to look at the thing from outside, without insight, he could be seen as (perhaps, I forget) the thirteenth, but to do that means disregarding the inner emotional truth. For we all know that those affairs or entanglements one has between serious loves, though they may number dozens and stretch over years, don't really count.

This way of looking at things creates a number of unhappy people, for it is well known that what doesn't really count for me might very well count for you. But there is no way of getting over this difficulty, for a serious love is the most important business in life, or nearly so. At any rate, most of us are engaged in looking for it. Even when we are in fact being very serious indeed with one person we still have an eighth of an eye cocked in case some stranger unexpectedly encountered might turn out to be even more serious. We are all entirely in agreement that we are in the right to taste, test, sip, and sample a thousand people on our way to the real one. It is not too much to say that in our circles tasting and sampling is probably the second most important activity, the first being earning money. Or to put it another way, if you are serious about this thing, you go on laying everybody that offers until something clicks and you're all set to go.

I have digressed from an earlier point; that I regarded this man I had lunch with (we call him A) as my first love; and still do, despite the Freudians, who insist on seeing my father as A and possibly my brother as B, making my (real) first love C. And despite, also, those who might ask: What about your two husbands and all those affairs?

What about them? I did not really love them, the way I loved A.

I had lunch with him. Then, quite by chance, I had tea with B. When I say B, here, I mean my second serious love, not my brother, or the little boys I was in love with between the ages of five and fifteen, if we are going to take fifteen (arbitrarily) as the point of no return... which last phrase is in itself a pretty brave defiance of the secular arbiters.

In between A and B (my count) there were a good many affairs, or samples, but they didn't score. B and I clicked, we went off like a bomb, though not quite as simply as A and I had clicked, because my heart was bruised, sullen, and suspicious because of A's throwing me over. Also there were all those ligaments and
adhesions binding me to A still to be loosened, one by one. However, for a time B
and I got on like a house on fire, and then we came to grief. My heart was again a
ton weight in my side.

If this were a stone in my side, a stone,
I could pluck it out and be free....

Having lunch with A, then tea with B, two men who between them had con-
sumed a decade of my precious years (I am not counting the test or trial affairs
in between) and, it is fair to say, had balanced all the delight (plenty and intense)
with misery (oh Lord, Lord)—moving from one to the other, in the course of an
afternoon, conversing amiably about this and that, with meanwhile my heart
giving no more than slight reminiscent tugs, the fish of memory at the end of a
long slack line...

To sum up, it was salutary.

Particularly as that evening I was expecting to meet C, or someone who
might very well turn out to be C; though I don’t want to give too much emphasis
to C, the truth is I can hardly remember what he looked like, but one can’t be ex-
pected to remember the unimportant ones one has sipped or tasted in between.
But after all, he might have turned out to be C, we might have clicked, and I was
in that state of mind (in which we all so often are) of thinking: He might turn
out to be the one. (I use a woman’s magazine phrase deliberately here, instead of
saying, as I might: Perhaps it will be serious.)

So there I was (I want to get the details and atmosphere right) standing at a
window looking into a street (Great Portland Street, as a matter of fact) and
thinking that while I would not dream of regretting my affairs, or experiences,
with A and B (it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all),
my anticipation of the heart because of spending an evening with a possible C
had a certain unreality, because there was no doubt that both A and B had
caused me unbelievable pain. Why, therefore, was I looking forward to C? I
should rather be running away as fast as I could.

It suddenly occurred to me that I was looking at the whole phenomenon
quite inaccurately. My (or perhaps I am permitted to say our?) way of looking at
it is that one must search for an A, or a B, or a C or a D with a certain combina-
tion of desirable or sympathetic qualities so that one may click, or sponta-
neously combust: or to put it differently, one needs a person who, like a saucer of
water, allows one to float off on him/her, like a transfer. But this wasn’t so at all.
Actually one carries with one a sort of burning spear stuck in one’s side, that one
waits for someone else to pull out; it is something painful, like a sore or a
wound, that one cannot wait to share with someone else.

I saw myself quite plainly in a moment of truth: I was standing at a window
(on the third floor) with A and B (to mention only the mountain peaks of my
emotional experience) behind me, a rather attractive woman, if I may say so, with
a mellowness that I would be the first to admit is the sad harbinger of age, but is
attractive by definition, because it is a testament to the amount of sampling and
sipping (I nearly wrote "simpling" and "sapping") I have done in my time....
There I stood, brushed, dressed, red-lipped, kohl-eyed, all waiting for an evening
with a possible C. And at another window overlooking (I think I am right in saying) Margaret Street, stood C, brushed, washed, shaved, smiling: an attractive
man (I think) and he was thinking: Perhaps she will turn out to be D (or A or 3 or f or %, or whatever symbol he used). We stood, separated by space, certainly, in identical conditions of pleasant uncertainty and anticipation, and we both held our hearts in our hands, all pink and palpitating and ready for pleasure and pain, and we were about to throw these hearts in each other's face like snowballs, or cricket balls (How's that?) or, more accurately, like great bleeding wounds: "Take my wound." Because the last thing one ever thinks at such moments is that he (or she) will say: Take my wound, please remove the spear from my side. No. not at all; one simply expects to get rid of one's own.

I decided I must go to the telephone and say, C!—You know that joke about the joke-makers who don't trouble to tell each other jokes, but simply say Joke I or Joke 2, and everyone roars with laughter, or snickers, or giggles appropriately. . . . Actually one could reverse the game by guessing whether it was Joke C(b) or Joke A(d) according to what sort of laughter a person made to match the silent thought. . . . Well, C (I imagined myself saying), the analogy is for our instruction: Let's take the whole thing as real or said. Let's not lick each other's sores; let's keep our hearts to ourselves. Because just consider it, C, how utterly absurd—here we stand at our respective windows with our palpitating hearts in our hands. . . .

At this moment, dear reader, I was forced simply to put down the telephone with an apology. For I felt the fingers of my left hand push outwards around something rather large, light, and slippery—hard to describe this sensation, really. My hand is not large, and my heart was in a state of inflation after having had lunch with A, tea with B, and then looking forward to C. . . . Anyway, my fingers were stretching out rather desperately to encompass an unknown, largish, lightish object, and I said: Excuse me a minute, to C, looked down, and there was my heart, in my hand.

I had to end the conversation there.

For one thing, to find that one has achieved something so often longed for, so easily, is upsetting. It's not as if I had been trying. To get something one wants simply by accident—no, there's no pleasure in it, no feeling of achievement. So to find myself heart-whole, or, more accurately, heart-less, or at any rate, rid of the damned thing, and at such an awkward moment, in the middle of an imaginary telephone call with a man who might possibly turn out to be C—well, it was irritating rather than not.

For another thing, a heart, raw and bleeding and fresh from one's side, is not the prettiest sight. I'm not going into that at all. I was appalled, and indeed embarrassed that that was what had been loving and beating away all those years, because if I'd had any idea at all—well, enough of that.

My problem was how to get rid of it.
How I Finally Lost My Heart

Simple, you'll say, drop it into the waste bucket.
Well, let me tell you, that's what I tried to do. I took a good look at this object, nearly died with embarrassment, and walked over to the rubbish can, where I tried to let it roll off my fingers. It wouldn't. It was stuck. There was my heart, a large red pulsing bleeding repulsive object, stuck to my fingers. What was I going to do? I sat down, lit a cigarette (with one hand, holding the matchbox between my knees), held my hand with the heart stuck on it over the side of the chair so that it could drip into a bucket, and considered.

If this were a stone in my hand, a stone,
I could throw it over a tree...

When I had finished the cigarette, I carefully unwrapped some tin foil of the kind used to wrap food in when cooking, and I fitted a sort of cover around my heart. This was absolutely and urgently necessary. First, it was smarting badly. After all, it had spent some forty years protected by flesh and ribs, and the air was too much for it. Secondly, I couldn't have any Tom, Dick, and Harry walking in and looking at it. Thirdly, I could not look at it for too long myself, it filled me with shame. The tin foil was effective, and indeed rather striking. It is quite pliable and now it seemed as if there were a stylized heart balanced on my palm, like a globe, in glittering, silvery substance. I almost felt I needed a scepter in the other hand to balance it... But the thing was, there is no other word for it, in bad taste. I then wrapped a scarf around hand and tin-foiled heart, and felt safer. Now it was a question of pretending to have hurt my hand until I could think of a way of getting rid of my heart altogether, short of amputating my hand.

Meanwhile I telephoned (really, not in imagination) C, who now would never be C. I could feel my heart, which was stuck so close to my fingers that I could feel every beat or tremor, give a gulp of resigned grief at the idea of this beautiful experience now never to be. I told him some idiotic lie about having flu. Well, he was all stiff and indignant, but concealing it urbaneUy, as I would have done, making a joke but allowing a tiny barb of sarcasm to rankle in the last well-chosen phrase. Then I sat down again to think out my whole situation.

There I sat.
What was I going to do?
There I sat.

I am going to have to skip about four days here, vital enough in all conscience, because I simply cannot go heartbeat by heartbeat through my memories. A pity, since I suppose this is what this story is about; but in brief: I drew the curtains, I took the telephone off the hook, I turned on the lights, I took the scarf off the glittering shape, then the tin foil; then I examined the heart. There were two-fifths of a century's experience to work through, and before I had even got through the first night, I was in a state hard to describe...

Or if I could pull the nerves from my skin
A quick red net to drag through a sea for fish...
By the end of the fourth day I was worn out. By no act of will, or intention, or desire, could I move that heart by a fraction—on the contrary, it was not only stuck to my fingers, like a sucked boiled sweet, but was actually growing to the flesh of my fingers and my palm.

I wrapped it up again in tin foil and scarf, and turned out the lights and pulled up the blinds and opened the curtains. It was about ten in the morning, an ordinary London day, neither hot nor cold nor clear nor clouded nor wet nor fine. And while the street is interesting, it is not exactly beautiful, so I wasn't looking at it so much as waiting for something to catch my attention while thinking of something else.

Suddenly I heard a tap-tap-tapping that got louder, sharp and clear, and I knew before I saw her that this was the sound of high heels on a pavement though it might just as well have been a hammer against stone. She walked fast opposite my window and her heels hit the pavement so hard that all the noises of the street seemed absorbed into that single tap-tap-clang-clang. As she reached the corner at Great Portland Street two London pigeons swooped diagonally from the sky very fast, as if they were bullets aimed to kill her; and then as they saw her they swooped up and off at an angle. Meanwhile she had turned the corner. All this has taken time to write down, but the thing happening took a couple of seconds: the woman's body hitting the pavement bang-bang through her heels then sharply turning the corner in a right angle; and the pigeons making another acute angle across hers and intersecting it in a fast swoop of displaced air. Nothing to all that, of course, nothing—she had gone off down the street, her heels tip-tapping, and the pigeons landed on my windowsill and began cooing. All gone, all vanished, the marvelous exact coordination of sound and movement, but it had happened, it had made me happy and exhilarated, I had no problems in this world, and I realized that the heart stuck to my fingers was quite loose. I couldn't get it off altogether, though I was tugging at it under the scarf and the tin foil, but almost.

I understood that sitting and analyzing each movement or pulse or beat of my heart through forty years was a mistake. I was on the wrong track altogether: this was the way to attach my red, bitter, delighted heart to my flesh for ever and ever.

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Ha! So you think I'm done! You think... Watch, I'll roll my heart in a mesh of rage And bounce it like a handball off Walls, faces, railings, umbrellas, and pigeons' backs... No, all that was no good at all; it just made things worse. What I must do is to take myself by surprise, as it were, the way I was taken by surprise over the woman and the pigeons and the sharp sounds of heels and silk wings.

I put on my coat, held my lumpy scarfed arm across my chest, so that if anyone said: What have you done with your hand? I could say: I've banged my finger in the door. Then I walked down into the street.
It wasn't easy to go among so many people, when I was worried that they were thinking: What has that woman done to her hand? because that made it hard to forget myself. And all the time it tingled and throbbed against my fingers, reminding me.

Now I was out, I didn't know what to do. Should I go and have lunch with someone? Or wander in the park? Or buy myself a dress? I decided to go to the Round Pond, and walk around it by myself. I was tired after four days and nights without sleep. I went down into the underground at Oxford Circus. Midday. Crowds of people. I felt self-conscious, but of course need not have worried. I swear you could walk naked down the street in London and no would even turn round.

So I went down the escalator and looked at the faces coming up past me on the other side, as I always do; and wondered, as I always do, how strange it is that those people and I should meet by chance in such a way, and how odd that we would never see each other again, or, if we did, we wouldn't know it. And I went onto the crowded platform and looked at the faces as I always do, and got into the train, which was very full, and found a seat. It wasn't as bad as at rush hour, but all the seats were filled. I leaned back and closed my eyes, deciding to sleep a little, being so tired. I was just beginning to doze off when I heard a woman's voice muttering, or rather declaiming:

"A gold cigarette case, well, that's a nice thing, isn't it, I must say, a gold case, yes..."

There was something about this voice which made me open my eyes: on the other side of the compartment, about eight persons away, sat a youngish woman, wearing a cheap green cloth coat, gloveless hands, flat brown shoes, and lisle stockings. She must be rather poor—a woman dressed like this is a rare sight, these days. But it was her posture that struck me. She was sitting half-twisted in her seat, so that her head was turned over her left shoulder, and she was looking straight at the stomach of an elderly man next to her. But it was clear she was not seeing it: her young staring eyes were sightless, she was looking inwards.

She was so clearly alone, in the crowded compartment, that it was not as embarrassing as it might have been. I looked around, and people were smiling, or exchanging glances, or winking, or ignoring her, according to their natures, but she was oblivious of us all.

She suddenly aroused herself, turned so that she sat straight in her seat, and directed her voice and her gaze to the opposite seat:

"Well so that's what you think, you think that, you think that do you, well, you think I'm just going to wait at home for you, but you gave her a gold case and..."

And with a clockwork movement of her whole thin person, she turned her narrow pale-haired head sideways over her left shoulder, and resumed her stiff empty stare at the man's stomach. He was grinning uncomfortably. I leaned forward to look...
along the line of people in the row of seats I sat in, and the man opposite her, a young man, had exactly the same look of discomfort which he was determined to keep amused. So we all looked at her, the young, thin, pale woman in her private drama of misery, who was so completely unconscious of us that she spoke and thought out loud. And again, without particular warning or reason, in between stops, so it wasn’t that she was disturbed from her dream by the train stopping at Bond Street, and then jumping forward again, she twisted her body frontways, and addressed the seat opposite her (the young man had got off, and a smart grey-curled matron had got in):

“Well I know about it now, don’t I, and if you come in all smiling and pleased well then I know, don’t I, you don’t have to tell me, I know, and I’ve said to her, I’ve said, I know he gave you a gold cigarette case...."

At which point, with the same clockwork impulse, she stopped, or was checked, or simply ran out, and turned herself half-around to stare at the stomach—the same stomach, for the middle-aged man was still there. But we stopped at Marble Arch and he got out, giving the compartment, rather than the people in it, a tolerant half-smile which said: I am sure I can trust you to realize that this unfortunate woman is stark staring mad. . . .

His seat remained empty. No people got in at Marble Arch, and the two people standing waiting for seats did not want to sit by her to receive her stare.

We all sat, looking gently in front of us, pretending to ourselves and to each other that we didn’t know the poor woman was mad and that in fact we ought to be doing something about it. I even wondered what I should say: Madam, you’re mad—shall I escort you to your home? Or: Poor thing, don’t go on like that, it doesn’t do any good, you know—just leave him, that’ll bring him to his senses. . . .

And behold, after the interval that was regulated by her inner mechanism had elapsed, she turned back and said to the smart matron who received this statement of accusation with perfect self-command:

“Yes, I know! Oh yes! And what about my shoes, what about them, a golden cigarette case is what she got, the filthy bitch, a golden case . . . .”

Stop. Twist. Stare. At the empty seat by her.

Extraordinary. Because it was a frozen misery, how shall I put it? A passionless passion—we were seeing unhappiness embodied; we were looking at the essence of some private tragedy—rather, Tragedy. There was no emotion in it. She was like an actress doing Accusation, or Betrayed Love, or Infidelity, when she has only just learned her lines and is not bothering to do more than get them right.

And whether she sat in her half-twisted position, her unblinking eyes staring at the greenish, furry, ugly covering of the train seat, or sat straight, directing her accusation to the smart woman opposite, there was a frightening immobility about her—yes, that was why she frightened us. For it was clear that she might
very well (if the inner machine ran down) stay silent, forever, in either twisted or
straight position, or at any point between them—yes, we could all imagine her,
frozen perpetually in some arbitrary pose. It was as if we watched the shell of
some woman going through certain predetermined motions.

For she was simply not there. What was there, who she was, it was impos-
sible to tell, though it was easy to imagine her thin, gentle little face breaking
into a smile in total forgetfulness of what she was enacting now. She did not
know she was in a train between Marble Arch and Queensway, nor that she was
publicly accusing her husband or lover, nor that we were looking at her.

And we, looking at her, felt an embarrassment and shame that was not on
her account at all... Suddenly I felt, under the scarf and the tin foil, a lightening of my fingers, as
my heart rolled loose.

I hastily took it off my palm, in case it decided to adhere there again, and I
removed the scarf, leaving balanced on my knees a perfect stylized heart, like a
silver heart on a Valentine card, though of course it was three-dimensional. This
heart was not so much harmless, no that isn’t the word, as artistic, but in very
bad taste, as I said. I could see that the people in the train, now looking at me
and the heart, and not at the poor madwoman, were pleased with it.

I got up, took the four or so paces to where she was, and laid the tin-foiled
heart down on the seat so that it received her stare.

For a moment she did not react, then with a groan or a mutter of relieved
and entirely theatrical grief, she leaned forward, picked up the glittering heart,
and clutched it in her arms, hugging it and rocking it back and forth, even laying
her cheek against it, while staring over its top at her husband as if to say: Look
what I’ve got, I don’t care about you and your cigarette case, I’ve got a silver heart.

I got up, since we were at Notting Hill Gate, and, followed by the pleased
congratulatory nods and smiles of the people left behind, I went out onto the
platform, up the escalators, into the street, and along to the park.

No heart. No heart at all. What bliss. What freedom...

Hear that sound? That’s laughter, yes.
That’s me laughing, yes, that’s me.

STUDY GUIDE

1. The first paragraph takes the clichéd title (ah, we expect, a romantic story!) and by taking it literally, shocks the reader and undercuts the romance. What can we infer if losing one’s heart were as easy as cutting it out? What can we infer from the phrase “like everyone else”?

2. Who is speaking? Certainly not a romantic, conventional woman. She’s so-
sophisticated, “liberated.” How do you know? What does this do to the story?