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Becoming Strangers is Louise Dean's first novel, and the winner of the Betty Trask Prize, 2004. Louise Dean lives in France with her husband and three children.

Becoming Strangers

Louise Dean



1

Before he'd had cancer he'd been bored with life. Since he'd taken dying seriously, he'd been busy; he was occupied with understanding the disease and training his body to resist it. How hardy he was, physically. Six years of operations and excisions, starting with his chest, then the cancerous cells had metastasized to his lungs and on to his liver. A suite of initial excisions revealed each encampment to be partially malignant. He'd insisted on warfare. Each time the doctors told him and his family the chances of recovery were poor and the recurrence of cancer a likelihood. Year after year a fresh crop of cells emerged, excisions followed and he lived. The knife-and-forking of his body seemed to give a perverse impetus to his will to survive.

His tenacious hold on life was partly begotten by the conviction that his life *must* have accrued some value over time. What about all the sights and sounds recorded, all those thoughts tracked? They must be worth something. They must add up to some meaning. Billions of words over the years ordered into a handful of simple notions. His mother! His country! Right and wrong!

He gave up work. He took to reading. Politics, philosophy, biographies.

An exploratory probe of his pancreas had revealed further metastasis just two weeks previously. They could not operate again, they said. He shook the doctor's right hand with both of his hands and nodded. Later that evening, he overheard his wife sharing the news over the phone, from the study, door

closed. 'He's ridden with it. They can't do anything for him now,' Annemieke said.

About three days later, their two adult sons had come by with the tickets for two weeks in paradise, a hotel spa resort on a Caribbean island. Very exclusive. Very final. He'd shaken their hands with both of his and nodded. Annemieke had kissed them.

'He's getting weak,' she had said, looking at her husband, 'the travelling won't be so easy. But I am strong enough for us both,' she'd added, then excused herself to answer the phone.

He had sat with his boys, holding the gift card between his fingers, pursing his lips, stroking his moustache, murmuring in bass tones, weighing reason as he listened to their news. The older boy was running his own Europe-wide Internet search business, the other finishing a PhD in philosophy at the University of Brussels. He tried to see them as real people.

Meanwhile, he could hear snatches of his wife's excitable conversation in the other room.

'Afterwards,' she was saying repeatedly and with emphasis.

He read the gift card again. The instruction was, '*Vermaak jullie!*' ('Enjoy yourselves!'), the implication that once that was done, he could come back and die properly.

This was going to be their last holiday. They had had a few last holidays previously, but this was going to be truly final. His wife's way of confirming this was to remind him now, on the aeroplane, that they had had some good times during their thirty-one years of marriage. She sighed from time to time as she turned the pages of her magazine before setting it aside.

'So many things,' she said to him, resting her jaw on her palm and looking into his face, 'and so empty, so meaningless.'

He agreed without looking at her.

'Very nice, very well made, but next year it is finished and if

you are going to spend so much on something . . . oh, it just drives me crazy.'

Removing peanut matter from a back tooth, mindful of her lipstick – she was an attractive woman – and taking a last swig of her gin and tonic, she told him that she had calculated they had had over forty holidays during their marriage. She handed the plastic glass, small bottle and tonic can to the flight attendant. The peanut packet she had rolled up and inserted into the can's opening.

He thought of paperbacks, triangular-heaped, wet and spineless by poolsides and of shellfish detritus left on dinner plates, pink and drying. He thought of the night-time efforts to kick away tucked-in white sheets. Hotels, hospitals; both had required from him a degree of submission. His wife did not submit. Her chin was hard. She used it to conclude her sentences. Her eyes sparkled. If she was pragmatic then she had reason to be. Initially he'd been given six months to live, he'd taken six years so far. It had caused her to be severe.

'Six, nearly seven years of lucidity,' Jan thought, catching her eye and looking quickly away, 'clarity come upon me like the word of God.'

'Excuse me,' he said, as his elbow knocked hers off the central armrest by mistake. He had confirmed his belief, hospital stay after hospital stay, that human relations were best conducted courteously; he was thankful for good manners. The existence of love, unconditional love, he doubted. He even wondered about his children. He had no idea whether he was ready to die; it didn't come in degrees after all, allowing one to get accustomed to it. Death was a binary affair, not cumulative. On/off. The starter pistol fired not a second before it fired.

Now, with the 'fasten seatbelts' lights illuminated and his wife tucking a spare miniature vodka into the pouch in front of her, he reminded himself of his resolve to make it up to her.

He barely knew her and he had gone to a great deal of trouble to know her less in the last few years. It was reasonable to think that neither of them was entirely to blame and it was possible, even now, that they might quit each other as friends. That was what he hoped this holiday was for; he hadn't told her as much, but he assumed she felt the same way. Given that he was, in fact, dying now.

To his left, he saw a segment of fellow Northern Europeans squinting and wincing at the sudden sheath of equatorial sunlight. He reached across his wife and with a neat action, using his forefinger and thumb, raised the shade over their window.

2

Annemieke's pleasure increased as the elevator rose. Her face pronounced a smile as the light illuminated the characters 'PH'. Her boys had not let her down. The room conformed to her standards in luxury; thick white towels, high thread-count sheets, stainless steel and lustrous wood – these were the things she had been persuaded were right.

In the bedroom her husband sat down with a book, adjusting his mouth and glasses with every turn of the page and dropping his shoulders, occasionally giving his neck a little shake.

'I thought reading was supposed to relax you,' she said, not for the first time.

She had gone to freshen up, ready to take a turn about the place, to see what it had to offer, but her husband had settled into the book. He settled, she moved. This was how they had always been; his illness had simply developed the difference between them as light develops photographic film.

She went off to see the spa. Everything was in order and above all else clean. She was accustomed to thanking God out loud for the cleanliness of any encounter she made. Restaurants, friends' homes, schools, and of course, in particular, toilets.

'I can tell a lot about a place when I go to the toilet,' she had declared to a variety of audiences, causing Jan to smile and say quietly, '*Summa summarium*.'

On her return to their room she described with careful bird-like hand movements the high ceilings, wooden fans, long glass windows on to an azure swimming pool with an adjacent

marble Jacuzzi. She had an eye for detail. The swimming pool was half covered by a Tuscan-effect palazzo roof, surrounded by a tiled veranda that looked out over a cliff on to the tumbling Atlantic Ocean. 'And, Jan, these are the same tiles that Leni and Eric are having in their shower room. But here they are on the outside. Leni likes to think that no one else puts outdoor tiles on the inside but I have seen it before, when we were on holiday in the Charente. I told her that.'

She had seen a group of men lounging around the pool, holding their stomachs in. Their women were in the Jacuzzi, talking sideways, keeping their faces to the sun.

Down a tree-lined pathway, there was a roofed bar, she told him, like an Italian outhouse with some thirty high stools against a brick-finished counter. In the centre there was a pizza oven and the smell of baked rosemary and hot wet Parmesan had made her hungry. Three young women, in robes from the spa, had been sharing a large flat pizza, their glasses were refilled with red-coloured cocktail from an ice-sweating jug. Through gardens with wide-leaved grass and plump blossoms, sprinkler-fat, she had come to a lawn with a small round pool in the middle and behind it a courtyard with access to some ground-floor rooms and a whitewashed stairway that led to the main hotel. On the first floor were two restaurants, one casual in the style of a French bistro, all heavy wood and aluminium, and the other furnished with candelabra and high-backed chairs, presenting themselves to large empty round tables. Some staff sat at one table and talked in earnest. She had stood for a moment at the door, watching them. The manager – the only one who wore casual clothes, the only one who was white – laid his suntanned forearms on the table and held out his handwritten notes so that the staff could see them. He seemed an agreeable young man, with an expressive and animated face. Handsome, she said, making a small leap of judgement. Here she paused.

Jan had picked up his book again.

'Good, good,' he said, 'it sounds your sort of place.'

She had seen a young couple in swimsuits kissing in the doorway to their room. They could quite easily have kissed in their room, but they needed to kiss there and then. The Spanish-looking girl had long ringlets of dark hair and the man was young enough to be smooth-skinned, hairless. How soft their skin must have felt as they pressed together. So young, so clean from the pool, clean all over. She wondered whether they were able to forgive each other when they argued. Perhaps they didn't argue. Perhaps the need to touch each other overwhelmed every discontent.

Jan was nodding at the book. It was not mute to him, it spoke, he listened and responded even as she stood there before him, hot behind the eyes, breathing little shallow breaths and looking at herself in the mirror. She did not look her age – forty-nine – but soon she would and then it would all be over for her. She had said her goodbyes in many different ways, tenderly and angrily. He hadn't heard them, either way.

She left the room and made for reception where she waited a long time for the young girl there to answer her questions regarding the horse riding.

She had spotted the Bible at home, among his books. 'I will not be alive like a dead person', she said to herself, 'waiting to live in the afterlife!' She could not stop herself from thinking such things. She lay awake at night reasoning the resentment into righteousness.

She gathered some leaflets now, he could look through them if he wanted to go off and do any of his tourism things. He could help himself. She was going to have a holiday that suited her. She would make the most of the spa. Her own health deserved some attention. Hadn't the doctors said that it's so often the carer's wellbeing that gets completely neglected? She

held the spa brochure at arm's length. Usually she borrowed Jan's glasses.

A revolting man was checking in, hot and bothered. She glanced at the signet ring on his right pinkie, the sweaty tendrils beneath his Panama hat and the shield of sweat emblazoned on his back. He said he was from South Africa but his accent was Irish with a self-assured rolling comedy of inflection. She waited for him to notice her, which he did.

'Well, hello,' he said to her with a grin. 'Nice weather isn't it? I think I've single-handedly raised the temperature in this wee room about five degrees.'

When she got back to the room, she gave Jan the pamphlets that were of 'cultural interest'. She had chosen those she considered the most ridiculous, a historical tour of the plantations and an afternoon of beadwork.

'These look like your sort of thing,' she said. 'There was a vulgar South African checking in downstairs. He made a pass at me. Perhaps he thinks he is at Club Med.'

Jan looked at his wife now that she was opposite him, perched on the side of a chair, studying her reflection in the long mirror. He could picture the scene at reception. She would have used her left elbow to prop herself as she leaned against the counter, leaving a delicate deliberate space between the counter and her breast. Her long fingers would have played with her necklace and when the man turned towards her she would have given him that same slow smile which she was giving the mirror now, a look that causes a man to look twice.

3

The next morning Annemieke called reception to ascertain whether there were any vacancies for a full body massage that day. Just one. She could come now. Jan was already awake, reading, making some notes in a small jotter he'd bought, sat on the balcony with a coffee and a cigarette. She had to smile, looking at Jan out there with his book of grievances. She had looked at it once or twice when he was absent. It was full of semi-philosophical notes and remarks, occasioned by his readings, a few of which dealt with human virtue, some were quotations neatly referenced, some seemed to be his own reflections. She could read into them plenty of criticism of herself, she was more than likely the 'middle class', the 'bourgeois', the hedonist, the materialist to whom he referred. When we die, everything dies, she said to herself, even the blame. The children wouldn't want his books and notes and jottings.

'I thought we might make an excursion,' he said pleasantly. 'We could hire a car. Have a look round the island.'

'I'm not a sightseer, Jan,' she said, 'as you know.'

She gave herself a good wash; she wanted to feel just right when she lay down on that massage couch. These indulgences were fraught in so many ways. Money and time ticking away while you tried to feel good. An indifferent masseur or beautician, an unpleasant manner, a painfully deep rub or treatment, thin towels, or the sight of herself, under bright lights in a full-length mirror: any of these could ruin it.

He was standing when she left.

'We might have lunch together,' he said.

'You look after yourself, I shouldn't want to hold you up.'

Naked under a robe, waiting with a cup of lemon tea outside the massage room, she became increasingly nervous at the selection of music being piped over the speakers. It was young music, all pulse and beat and gravel and urgency. She would not be able to relax to it.

With the usual command given, to undress and lie under the single white sheet while the masseuse stepped out of the room, she felt more at ease. The lights were dimmed, the music lowered. When the masseuse returned, she asked Annemieke questions in a monotonous voice of Eastern European accent, interspersing them with notes about the oils she was using, varying neither the cadence nor the metre of her speech.

'So you have come here with husband. This is a neroli, orange and bergamot oil very good to stimulate the senses and invigorate your spirits. They are older, your children, then. They have left home.'

'How old do you think I am?' said Annemieke.

'Forty something,' she said, 'early forties.'

Annemieke was reminded of the option to tip the masseuse. This gave her an anxiety like heartburn. She started to wonder how much time had passed and how much remained. Opening her eyes and turning her neck slightly to find the clock, she cricked her neck and exclaimed. The masseuse spoke gently.

'You hurt your neck. You have very stressful life.'

Already twenty minutes had passed.

'Yes,' Annemieke said and snapped her jaws and eyelids shut.

The masseuse put her fingertips to Annemieke's temples and rubbed in small circles, softly but with growing pressure. In her mind's eye, Annemieke saw Jan's face, protuberant with his own sorrow. The masseuse finished with deep strokes of

her thumbs against the sole of one of Annemieke's soft feet, clasping the foot like a prize, pressing the toes to her collarbone.

Standing in her robe, at the spa reception, Annemieke signed the chit quickly, looking at the counter, not at the girl. She did not leave a tip.

Only a homosexual or a has-been wears *short* shorts, thought Annemieke, standing still in front of the man. The South African pulled his short shorts back up from around his ankles and positioned his genitals gamely inside the fishing-net interior. They were dark blue nylon with a white-bordered slit up either side.

Annemieke had gone into the wrong changing room after her massage, deliberately. She had observed that it was the men's room and loosened her robe slightly to affect a deeper V before she entered. The day before, as she waited for the elevator back to their room, she had heard the South African arrange a midday massage – or a 'rub-down', as he called it – and as chance would have it, there they both were, in a small stark white changing room, her robe slipping.

A man such as he was not going to refuse.

'I must be in the wrong place,' she said, a shoulder exposed, and she could see by his expression that he remembered her and from the goofy turning of his mouth that he was rapidly putting two and two together and coming up with an erection.

She locked the door behind them with the simple depression of a round button on the handle. She approached him and put her hand inside the short shorts, unleashing her catch from the net. And all the time he smiled like a son of a bitch. Expressionless, she gave the hot and hairy handful a few pulls in order to make sense of the mess. Humbly and warily he placed his hands on her breasts, as if waiting for the next steps to be communicated.