

An extract from *Loitering With Intent* by Muriel Spark

One day in the middle of the twentieth century I sat in an old graveyard which had not yet been demolished, in the Kensington area of London, when a young policeman stepped off the path and came over to me. He was shy and smiling, he might have been coming over the grass to ask me for a game of tennis. He only wanted to know what I was doing but plainly he didn't like to ask. I told him I was writing a poem, and offered him a sandwich which he refused as he had just had his dinner himself. He stopped to talk awhile, then he said good-bye, the graves must be very old, and that he wished me good luck and that it was nice to speak to somebody.

This was the last day of a whole chunk of my life but I didn't know that at the time. I sat on the stone slab of some Victorian grave writing my poem as long as the sun lasted. I lived nearby in a bedsitting-room with a gas fire and a gas ring operated by pre-decimal pennies and shillings in the slot, whichever you preferred or had. My morale was high. I needed a job, but that, which should have been a depressing factor when viewed in cold blood, in fact simply was not. Neither was the swinishness of my landlord, a Mr Alexander, short of stature. I was reluctant to go home lest he should waylay me. I owed him no rent but he kept insisting that I should take a larger and more expensive room in his house, seeing that I had overcrowded the small single room with my books, my papers, my boxes and bags, my food stores and the evidence of constant visitors who stayed to tea or came late.

So far I had stood up to the landlord's claim that I was virtually living a double-room life for single-room pay. At the same time I was fascinated by his swinishness. Tall Mrs Alexander always kept in the background so far as the renting of rooms was concerned, determined not to be confused with a landlady. Her hair was always glossy black, new from the hairdresser, her nails polished red. She stepped in and out of the house with a polite nod like another, but more superior, tenant. I fairly drank her in with my mind while smiling politely back. I had nothing whatsoever against these Alexanders except in the matter of their wanting me to take on a higher-priced room. If he had thrown me out I would still have had nothing much against them, I would mainly have been fascinated. In a sense I felt that the swine Alexander was quite excellent as such, surpassingly hand-picked. And although I wanted to avoid

him on my return to my lodging I knew very well I had something to gain from a confrontation, should it happen. In fact, I was aware of a demon inside me that rejoiced in seeing people as they were, and not only that, but more than ever as they were, and more, and more.

At that time I had a number of marvellous friends, full of good and evil. I was close on penniless but my spirits were all the more high because I had recently escaped from the Autobiographical Association (non-profit-making) where I was thought rather mad, if not evil. I will tell you about the Autobiographical Association . . . .