

# Folkestone Beef

Paul Brasington

# One

Frank Buckland visited Folkestone harbour in the last century and saw that most of the fishermen's houses were adorned with "festoons of fish hung out to dry. There was no head, tail or fins to them ... the rough skin on their reverse side told me at once they were a species of dogfish. I asked what they were? 'Folkestone beef,' was the reply. What sort of fish is this? 'That's a Rig;' and this? 'That's a Huss;'" .... He went on to say that as soon as the boats arrived, the fish-dealers could be seen cutting the heads, tails and fins and halving the fish, which were then salted and hung out to dry. When grilled they tasted like veal chops, and were eaten "by the poorer class, as relish for breakfast".

*Jane Grigson Fish Cookery 1973*

This is a piece of fiction, not gossip. I have borrowed freely from anecdotes and incidents around me, but I have felt equally free to invent, distort and embellish to the point where any resemblance to characters living or dead is neither here nor there.

## Huss

It was in that time, a town dreaming it could re-invent itself, dreaming in the hope of a different collective spirit which would work against the drift of the fifty thousand souls who lived there, their busy lives, as if this change could bring some meaning they had missed.

The hope of change was in the air, intangible but real, like a shimmer or scent. It was there in the stories, the headlines in the papers, in the scaffolding put up on the long derelict buildings, the boarded windows that seemed to speak for the dead silence of the abandoned buildings but might just be promising new life. It was a hope of progress, a movement forward which was something more than the lumpen everyday passage of time, the plod past of each day, or month, another year.

It was approaching that time, that month, that day. On the morning of her forty-first birthday Claire Jones asked herself whether she would be content to spend the remaining half of her life alone, assuming she had reached the mid-point of her life. She found herself untroubled by the prospect, whether she had twenty or forty years left. She had grown used to the solitude and liked her independence. Circumstance came to mock the face of her resolve, her embrace of what she had. On the evening of her forty-first birthday Claire met Robert Warren. A year later she married him, conceding her independence for his regular companionship. We all change our minds, often easily when there seems a reason.

Claire had planned to spend that evening on her own. It was a way of acknowledging her single condition, and embracing it. She did not want to cook, and she did not want to sit at a restaurant table by herself. Instead she went down to the harbour for some fish and chips. She had salad at home, and a good bottle of white wine. She thought she might watch a romantic video, not because she felt particularly romantic, but because she imagined it would entertain her without making too many demands. Her mother would have been scornful of this, and that seemed a good enough reason to do what she herself wanted.

On the other hand she might just settle down with a book. Claire still liked reading.

She had to read for her work, but this did not dilute the pleasure. She counted herself lucky that she had a job she half cared about. She had a degree in English Literature from York University. She said she loved words, the way the sound of them and sometimes even the look of them could shape how we felt. If she did not have the energy for a book she could always look at *The Guardian's* cryptic crossword. She could rarely complete more than half the clues, but she was too stubborn or at times felt life was too short to spend hours studying clues and their answers, or however it was that you came to know the rules of the game.

This was the simple pleasure of her solitary condition. She could choose between these things. She could do what she wanted.

Claire taught English at the local girls' grammar school. She was head of the department and as far as she knew moderately popular with her colleagues. At least, no one disliked her. Outside work she had an established circle of friends and they had naturally asked her what she planned to do to celebrate her birthday. She told them she would be busy, and let them think there was some kind of interesting mystery about her plans. They ragged her a little about this but did not pry further, knowing the limits of what you could say to Claire. She would argue that forty-one was not much of a birthday, not much of an age. She was in a strange mood.

The harbour was the best place for fish and chips in the town, with one shop claiming that all its fish were freshly caught in local boats. It had opened only recently. Claire liked to think she valued the finer things in life and wondered about the claim to fresh fish: the shop seemed no more expensive than Folkestone's other chippies and she thought local people would resist paying a premium for something better. The shop owners might have been lying, but surely they would have been stopped by the authorities if they lied. Claire did not like the idea that people could lie and get away with it.

Fresh fish would once have been valued here. The town had flourished in the Edwardian age and had gone into steep decay from the end of the Second World War. All through this time it had never lost its pretensions, its assumed air of grace and good favour. Even in its worst doldrums there were people with money in Folkestone and if it had hardly showed as the shops closed down, they controlled the place quietly,

innately conservative and blocking any initiative that might have made for a livelier environment. Claire had grown up here, loathing it in her teens but then coming to accept it. All the natural advantages of its location, clustered over a small cliff in the shadow of the North Downs as they came to their end in the sea, the features that had made it so popular with the Edwardians, all these advantages were still present. The pavilions and bathing machines had gone, but many of the fine buildings remained, some in decay. Then there was the sea itself, the mostly quiet shingle beaches lying beneath the wooded slopes of the cliff. Only when she went away to York did she realise how much she had come to count on the ever-moving presence of the sea. Now it was more than acceptance. She did not want to live anywhere else. She had not lost sight of the town's faults, the narrow outlook of its people, their provincial petty-mindedness, but she saw these traits everywhere she went. She was one of them and yet she wanted to hold herself apart. If you felt superior to them it was easier to live with the prevailing spirit of the town's ruling elite.

But this was the time of change, shrewd money from London beginning to recognise the town's potential (and its undervalued property). You could see it happening down here by the harbour, the old cobbled streets and nineteenth century houses making an obvious claim for conservation and celebration, the amusement arcades that had characterised its twilight hours as a daytripping haven for poor South Londoners giving way to more monied attractions and designed finesse. The changes were subtle, but tangible, the old shack of the harbour-front cafe turned into a quaint seafood cafe, and then overshadowed by the gleam of the chrome and varnished wood from Chummy's architectural-award winning whelk stand. She was enjoying the quiet transformation, its feeling of promise, even if she was unsure she would like the end result, the weekend London bankers with their obtrusive self-confidence. Perhaps she would then take the money and run, an ageing spinster with her hidden depths, a woman who had come to terms with who she was and who had learnt to accept it. She walked under the railway arches to the quayside. It was a warm evening, the lights beginning to go on in the houses and over the pub signs, the water cold and dark, tinged with black and very still, and high against the harbour wall for the tide had come in, the small fishing fleet placed like a herd of sitting cattle on the dark blue field

of the high tide.

There was a small queue in the chip shop, people leaning against the line and glass of the window, hanging back from the serving counter, waiting for their orders to be cooked. The plump woman behind the counter smiled at her, asking what she wanted. She looked up at the chalkboard placed high on the wall behind the counter, above the plump woman's head.

"I'd like a ... a portion of chips and a piece of haddock, please."

She realised that this was not how people normally asked for fish and chips, but did not see why she should pretend to speak a language that was unnatural to her. She stood by her formality. It protected her from the normal people. It was not as if she went into fish and chip shops very often. Perhaps this was why she felt a little nervous. Here was the good thing about etiquette, if you knew it; it gave you a confidence even in strange places. She did not have that confidence. Being forty-one she knew it would never come to her, not now. The plump woman shook her head, still smiling.

"Sorry love, no haddock left today."

Claire wanted to protest. It was written on the board, so why had they not scrubbed it out? She knew better than to speak her mind, and she betrayed her nervousness by beginning to bluster.

"Then, what can I have? I don't really want cod."

"The huss is very good," replied the plump woman. This did not help Claire.

"I don't think I've ever had huss. What's it like? Is it like haddock?"

The woman smiled, indulging her.

"Never had a bit of rock?" she said. "Dear me, you've never lived."

It seemed he was listening, and took his prompt from the woman's words. He spoke to her out of the space beside her. He was last in the line of people by the window, nearest to her.

"It tastes much like any other white fish," he said, "but it has a meatier texture, more like monkfish, but probably not as fine. Definitely not as fine. Still, I'd agree it's good in its way, and there's only one big bone down the middle to worry about. If you don't like bones it's very easy to cut the flesh away from it, and then there aren't any small bones to get stuck in your throat. Nobody really likes struggling with bones do they?"

She looked at him. If he had not spoken she might not have noticed him. He was close to her age she thought, with short dark hair, taller than her (this was not difficult) and stocky, but not fat she thought. He had a big square face and when she looked again she thought it was a handsome face. He had very bright blue eyes, and they drew you to his face. There was something boyish about him, which interested her. Still she was confused about the fish.

"Will I like it?" she asked.

He looked at her, as if to suggest that this was a mad question, but there was a smile on his lips.

"That I couldn't judge. You'll have to try it and if you don't like it, well you'll know better next time. I'm waiting for some myself, so you could say that I must like it, and that should be enough for anyone."

He gave her that charming, boyish smile again. Another customer had come in behind her. The plump woman was still waiting, but Claire imagined she was losing patience.

"I'll have that," she said. "Some chips and a piece of ..."

"Huss ..."

"That's right." She paused, a weak memory stirring. It came to her. She added, "I think it's dogfish isn't it?"

The man nodded.

"Doesn't get called that so often. I suppose it puts people off, thinking about dogs. It's called Rock Salmon as well, though I don't know why. It's nothing like salmon, and I can't see that it hangs around on rocks either."

He was looking hard at her face and she felt this attention like an intrusion, turning her head away a little embarrassed. He had turned his own head so quickly that she wondered if she had mistaken him. He was looking along the line of people by the window. They were being served steadily, filing out of the shop with their paper packets. It would soon be his turn. The plump woman looked at him, spreading out the creamy paper flat beneath her hands, then placing a moulded cardboard tray on top of it.

"Rock and chips, wrapped?"

“That’s the one.”

“Salt and vinegar?”

He shook his head vigorously. “I’m bitter enough already.”

The plump woman did not change her smile, as if she had not heard him. This seemed to amuse him. Claire thought it was quite a funny remark, and then she found herself saying

“Are you just buying for one?”

What was she thinking of? He looked pleased at her.

“Yes, I’m all on me tod.”

“Me too.”

“I’d noticed. Shall I wait for you?”

And she said yes. Now the plump woman did change her expression. She gave them a look, though Claire was not sure what she meant. She was thinking, what did it mean that he had refused salt and vinegar? Claire loathed malt vinegar herself, so that even the smell of it would ruin a meal for her. She was wondering, for no real reason, if this co-incidence of their tastes could have been somehow significant, a sign of some bond between them. She told herself she did not believe in these sentimental notions about transcendent bonds and instinctive relationships.

He had stepped out of the shop, but was waiting for her, holding his hot parcel of food in both hands.

“Shall we go and look at the sea while we eat?” he asked.

She thought this was a nice idea, but by the time she had thought this she was already saying

“I was going to go home. I had some wine and salad. It’s my birthday you see.”

“You were going to eat like that... on your own?” He was looking at her curiously again.

She realised she was not about to invite a stranger to her home on the grounds that he had helped her with the huss, or the fact that he seemed to share her distaste for vinegar. She did not even know if she liked the fish yet. She felt confused, unsure of the best thing to say, not wanting to offend him. She wanted to encourage him without seeming forward. She did not like to be confused. She stumbled around the

words.

“I’d like, I mean, I’ve been in a funny mood. I wanted to be alone, because there’s nothing special about my age, the birthday. But you’re right. It’s a lovely evening. Let’s go to the beach, somewhere along the cliff. I love it down there. It would be lovely.”

They walked along the road towards the East Cliff. The road came to a dead end with a path winding down to Folkestone’s sandy beach, mostly covered now by the high tide. There was no one else around, which seemed strange for this time of year, or time of the evening. It was unusual, but it was how the evening was, how she would remember it. He stopped by the wall at the end of the road, looking over the sands, and leaned against it, half sitting on the top of the wall, unwrapping his parcel.

“My name is Robert,” he said. “Robert Warren. My friends call me Rob. I’m pleased to meet you.”

Claire told him her name, sitting next to him on the wall, a little to one side, angled towards him but with a decent space between them. She began to explain, she lived in a flat on the Leas, the clifftop walk that ran from a point above the harbour for a mile or so to the top of Sandgate Hill at the western end of the town. The Leas promenade was the most obvious remaining feature of elegant Edwardian Folkestone. From the Leas the cliff dropped straight down to the greenery of the town’s coastal park and then the run of the pebbled beaches, a run unbroken to the sands of Dymchurch on Romney Marsh. Once there had been dress regulations for those who would walk on the Leas (it was owned and controlled by the estate of Lord Radnor). Even today the people living in the houses that overlooked the broad walk thought themselves superior to the ordinary townspeople. Claire scorned them for their pretensions, though she lived among them. She hoped he would share this view. She hoped he was an unpretentious man himself. Certainly he nodded his head and looked pleased when she told him about her home, and what she thought of it.

When she bit into the fish it was just as he had said. There was nothing fine about it, but it was pleasant and she liked the texture. She told him it was good.

“And if it had been on the board as dogfish would you have ordered it do you think?”

She shrugged.

“I’m not sure it would worry me. It’s just a name.”

He nodded again, then shook his head.

“Sometimes names can matter ...” He stopped himself and smiled as if to re-assure her. “They’re not even ugly, not like a monkfish. It’s just a little shark I think, which is probably why it has that meaty texture. It was always a cheap fish, never considered one of the finer fish for gentlemen. But fashions change don’t they? I’m old enough to remember when they used to sell monkfish as mock-scampi. The French valued it but here in England it was nothing.”

She looked around the harbour, wondering how old he was, perhaps a little older than her but it was hard to tell, give or take five years, her eyes going past the modern low rise flats immediately beside them to the older cottages that led back to the railway bridge and the buildings for the business of the fishing fleet.

“I like to imagine how it used to be down here,” she said. “It must have been poor, certainly, but very much its own place, an old Cinque port and a real place, you know, out of the way and out of step with the rest of the country, the industrial revolution and all that. It only really began to change when they brought the railway here.”

“In the middle of the nineteenth century.”

“You know about these things?”

“In a limited way. I’m interested in the built environment. I work as an architect.”

“That’s nice, doing creative work for your job I mean.”

He shook his head, smiling ironically.

“Most of the time it’s about negotiating bureaucracies. Still I suppose there’s something at the heart of it, a dream that starts in your head whenever you’re faced with a new site, and something satisfying too if you can realise that image without too many compromises.”

“I’m not sure about dreams,” she said. “The finished thing, the real thing, that’s what counts.”

He hesitated, his face uncertain.

“It has to start somewhere.”

She wanted to re-assure him.

“Of course ... I’m just saying, well, I don’t know what I’m saying really. Just that I’m not much of a dreamer myself. Teaching English, I mean, I love books, and other

creative work, but I know I’m not creative myself. I never had the imagination.”

His face had brightened.

“I bet that’s not really true,” and she smiled and shook her head, because she felt she knew herself better. It did not matter.

He continued to introduce himself. He too lived in a flat, in the west end of the town, closer to Sandgate. He was divorced (hence the flat, he said ruefully) with three children. The eldest boy was in his mid teens, then there was a girl and another boy. He saw them often. He worked for himself and made a reasonable living, though he stressed that most of the work was on small local projects.

“So how do you know so much about fish?” she asked.

“I like cooking,” he replied. “I liked cooking before I was divorced, but now it’s just part of my life, except on nights like this. Not that I get too adventurous these days. It’s not exciting, cooking for yourself.”

“That’s pretty much how I feel.”

It was nearly dark now, out at sea and spreading up through the sky. There was a streetlamp close to them, keeping everything clear around them. Their empty chip papers lay held close to their laps, their fingers greasy from eating. He said, I have an idea.

He stood up from the wall, wiping his fingers over the paper and bundling it into a ball, then holding out his hand to her. She left him standing, his hand held out there, while she folded her own paper neatly, wondering what she should do. She looked up from the folded paper, the mottled orange grey of the tarmac in the streetlight, and she saw his boyish face. She decided then, letting him pull her up from the wall.

They walked with their arms stretched out to each other as he led her back along the quayside, under the railway arches and then the shadow of the shabby white tower of the harbour hotel. He led her past the funfair flickering with light and noise, tinny music and the clattering of bumper cars, the clatter of other machines. She smelt candy floss, a real touch of her childhood and she thought she could not bear to eat it now. He walked a little faster than she wanted to go but still she went with him. The pebble beach was to their left as the ground began to rise, this their path into the coastal park. There were some cars parked around, left over she thought from determined day

trippers still up in the town or along the beach enjoying themselves, and some people out walking, some with dogs, all taking in this warm and thrilling early night air. Across the water she could see the lights of the French shore, gleaming white red and green above the line of the water. She was beginning to wonder how much further she should walk with him. She did not feel unsafe (there were too many other people about at this end of the town) but now they had passed the lower station of the funicular lift and above them jutted the fading art deco grandeur of the Leas Cliff Hall, she was wondering what she could expect. She knew nothing about him and she did not want any embarrassment. Ahead there was only the darkening foliage of the park, the old toll road refurbished to become a successful public space. They had walked into the trees now, the way lit by streetlamps, the night air quietly alive with the buzz of crickets. From the planting in the park she felt the aromatic scent of the bushes, not knowing what was there, but with the crickets the scents were reminiscent of being abroad, exotic and away from home, and she liked the feeling that all this was happening here in her home.

They had come to the first part of the children's play area. A climbing frame masqueraded as a wrecked and broken sailing ship, surrounded by half barrels and other functional props. Further along by the swinging ropes and spectacular turrets of the play castle she could hear teenage voices laughing in their croaky and not-long broken way. She thought they were probably horsing about harmlessly now the real children had gone home to their beds, and all the same she did not want to confront them, did not want to share her own horsing about. She was glad when Robert stopped.

"These things," he said. "Wouldn't you have just killed for them as a kid? Just think of the adventures you could have made up around them ..."

He sprang from the path and pulled himself quickly up and over the wooden flank of the half sunken and bisected ship, disappearing for a moment over the rail and then she saw his head bobbing up, a big grin on his face and it was clear in the lamplight. She stayed on the path.

"We used to go a lot to swings," she said carefully. "I liked them, the roundabouts and slides."

"Oh yes," he said, "but do you remember how it was you felt, the daring it took the first time you went headfirst down one of those slides, wondering if you'd fly off the bottom, like losing your virginity, or something, the sense you'd never look back? And then there were the witches' hats. Do you remember them? They had those great bell-like frames that would bang on the centre post as you spun round on them, standing up on the outside rim, holding onto the bars? Fantastic ..."

She found herself smiling. She had not thought of witches' hats for decades. Now she realised she could not remember when she had stopped seeing them, when they had disappeared. His thoughts seemed to be running in parallel with hers.

"You have to suppose, they are too dangerous for our overprotective times. Can't have talk of witches, and I suppose more to the point you can't have anything that could leave the council open to compensation claims. It's a big shame, but all the same, this is some compensation!"

She saw his head move around happily, taking in the designed and suggestive forms of the equipment, greying outlines in the lit dusk.

"Why don't you come on board?"

She looked dubiously at him, but she did not suppose he could see her expression. She hesitated for that moment, then felt something quicken in her, a girlish energy. She stepped off the path and began to cross the sand. She was telling herself, she was forty-one years old that day, and all the time looking at his bobbing head. She was standing in front of him and she put her face close to him, much on the same level as him as she stood at her full height.

"I'm not coming up there," she said, and he kissed her or perhaps she kissed him. Afterwards, strangely, she was not sure. It did not matter, because the next moment they were kissing each other. He had twisted from sitting to lean forward on his knees, leaning forward over the top rail, and taking her face in both hands. They were pressing their lips and mouths into each other, a fluid pressure that seemed like passion, or desperation. It was as though she had forgotten what this felt like, and she struggled to remember when she had last kissed anyone with this passion, it felt so alien and exciting.

It had been more than ten years since she had last thought herself in love. She had

given up then, thinking it was something about her, something she could not do. She had seen men from time to time since, but had remained unmoved. She was not in love now, but his kiss stirred her, and she was wondering what this meant. She pulled herself back from him. She wanted to push him away, just a little. She said

“Don't think you can seduce me with your talk of children's playgrounds.”

That made him laugh, and then his face became serious as he stood up. If this was supposed to signal a change of tone it was hard to take him seriously. He was standing on the platform of a child's toy, outsize and out of place.

“And you mustn't think,” he replied, “that I do this often. In fact I don't do it at all, though I have imagined it. I don't know how it could be, but it suddenly seemed possible tonight and so here we are. It just felt right, the right thing to do, coming here anyway, and then kissing you.”

She nodded, keeping her distance.

“It was. I felt the same, but you'll have to give me a moment you know, to adjust, to think this through. It's very strange for me.”

He jumped over the handrail, landing in a crouch, then straightening himself up he leaned against the bowed flank of the ship. “Absolutely,” he said, holding his open palms out towards her. “You must think it through and through. Perhaps it's just a bit of passing desire. That's human enough. It won't matter very much.”

She heard him, but this did not seem right. There was a liberation in the doubt they had removed, the knowing that their desire was mutual. He held out his palms towards her and she had to take them.

“But maybe,” he went on, “just maybe it's more. Just maybe it's special. How would you tell? With time I suppose. As I've got older I've got more romantic, not more cynical, not like you're supposed to be. I've come to think that there are people, who will just be good together and there will be a spark between them, and I'm not sure, not sure if you can ever be sure but I'm just wondering if that's what we've felt this evening.”

She smiled at him, turning his hands around in her own. She could not let him say these stupid things, nor let him see that she thought them stupid.

“I don't know about being romantic, or more romantic.” She was not looking at him.

“I think you have to be pretty hard-headed these days. This is a good start, and I'd like to think, that we can see each other again. This is a little weird though, I think you'll admit. Unusual and it's been fun, though not what I thought would happen on my forty-first birthday, though I'm not sure what I thought would happen. I have got used to thinking that nothing would happen so this is a little disconcerting. I think it's a good time to say goodnight, though you can walk me home first.”

He smiled and nodded happily. He walked with her up the zigzag path, another sign of Folkestone's old glories. He kissed her again at the door and for some moments the passion was back again. but he seemed happy to let it go, happy not to come in. They had exchanged numbers. They would see each other again and that seemed enough.

*Never killed anyone, though wanted to. That's a human thing, a matter of anger. Part of our nature to compete against each other and destroy whatever frustrates our desire. Try to tell you have never felt it. Feel nothing but scorn for you.*

*But then probably, scorn you anyway. What do you know? Where would you start to try to understand? No ordinary being. Much favoured by, by fate or my mother, or something, the accident of birth, the gifts we bring into this life. Hard not to wonder at this, hard not to marvel at the good fortune of not being born in some African shithole, scraping around for food and water, plagued by insects and disease, and then in the middle of all that shit being told by some kindly missionary that God loves you. Well he must have adored, me born in warmth and comfort, born to stand apart even in this cosseted place, when we have learnt to worship fame, sex, money, the things to hand, dispensing with our cruel gods. Good riddance, to hell with them.*

*Still we go on, stutter and die, our new fate, our new nothingness. Say that love makes the world go round, that glorious half truth, that glorious dream. Might as well say that hate drives humanity, for it would be just as true. Neither here nor there. Require you, to see more clearly, to think more clearly.*

*Have you ever seen anyone die? A true mystery, quite moving in its way. One moment you are looking at a fellow being, even if he is unconscious, immobile, while you watch his breathing, the small movements of his skin and you feel his presence, know that he is with you. The next moment and with so little change, he's gone. The body looks much the same, but it has become a body. Curious, our sense of animation, how it permeates things. Curious to know whether this is something real or just the ornate working of our imagination. But even if it was, that would not make this idea of life in us a trivial thing. Few ideas have driven men so strongly, this idea of the power of life and death. We go back to our gods.*

*Not that, no not that no becoming godlike if I take on this power of life and death. Not that vain. Killing reflects a base instinct, nothing more human than that. We are predators after all. We don't see god as a predator. God only makes sense as a creator. And then doesn't make sense at all.*

*Things to hand ... our everyday predation: you see beautiful women all around you. They are looking for men, perhaps at some elemental level out of an instinct to breed and prosper, but we have moved beyond these base levels. Consider instead their vanity. They tease men*

*with an illusion of meaning, as if their company could make a life suddenly different, somehow significant. It's no use, no comfort, because they can change nothing, and when they have come up against that nothing they will talk of human frailty, the sadness of relationships going wrong, and nursing their glorious vanity move on to the next one, the process starting again.*

*What difference could anybody else make? In the end it's just you, struggling through this span of days, waiting for the darkness. Black them out, out. They are not your friends, never will be. Perhaps it is time to start preying on the predators.*

*No perhaps about it. You could show them.*

*You have got used to being alone, because you had to, and now you've come to know the truth of that solitude. You me, I. It all comes to the same thing, that black thing. Control yourself, possess yourself. Not born for such maudlin self pity (what else could self-pity be?) Self pity is for the weak, and I am not weak.*

*Quiet for too long. Put up with this stillness for too long. It was time to change the life, time to change everything. It is a new beginning.*

## Dove

In the last months of my marriage to Marianne it was as though everything became unreal around me. I had lived for years with the growing certainty that the marriage was over, and there seemed nothing I could do about it. I had done nothing about it. It was just part of the way I thought about my life, the loveless misery that I deserved, until without any particular event to prompt me it seemed suddenly unbearable. Even later, with all the burden of hindsight, I was not sure what brought me to this end of the tether. There was no other woman, and my children were young enough to need me at home. I had always lived like this. Then on that one day, though I could not be sure what day it was, I decided that I would have to change our lives. I know this might seem presumptuous, but Marianne would never have agreed with me even if she thought I was right. Nothing moved immediately with this realisation. But it did bring on, over the next few days or weeks, a subtle and then obvious alienation, even from the things I cared about, even my children. I loved my children, but in the end this love did not make any difference to what I did, the pain I put them through. I could not help it. I could no longer spare them that pain. I had to stop doing what felt so clearly wrong.

Who can say why marriages go wrong? People do of course and some make a living from it, but I think it must be always specific, something personal. I have occasionally believed that the failure of my own marriage started with something as banal as boredom, but I am not sure it was true. The problems may have been there from the start, common enough. When you're interested in someone you're not interested in the things that divide you. You believe that what binds you will overwhelm them, until the balance twists and suddenly the divisions are all that matter. For us, the distance crept between us, a steady alienation. I waited for years unable to raise the subject with Marianne for fear that if I did it would bring on the break, and I did not want to end it then, even if I was unhappy. I was not ready for the end, the pain and fury I could so easily foresee. I was not ready to turn my back on what felt like my life.

I met Marianne in the final year of my architectural degree, before I went on to my intermediate training. She was working in public relations, newly out of college, a few months older than me. Now it seems like we were not much more than children, but I

know we felt differently then.

When your life goes wrong you go back over the time you had together, revising your history, seeing everything as a sign pointing to the end which at the time you could not have anticipated. The new pictures might be false, or they might have some truth. It's a natural urge, and it's as though we must veer all the time between the points where we simply live our lives, and the places where we detach ourselves to try to read those lives, to understand them as something purposeful, as if they had an end rather than just ending. Religious people would say that this was natural and important, an apprehension of the divine at work in us. I can see the force of that, though I can no longer make the necessary leap of faith to believe it. All the same I have carried on as if I believed it, even with my lapsed faith still struggling to make sense of all I had. I could not, cannot pretend that nothing matters to me, as if we just messed around here for a little before we die, but I also know it might be true. I feel no wiser now than I did then. At the end of my first marriage this inner patter of questions and non-answers cut me off from a direct experience of my life. It was for a time like I'd become a ghost, going through the motions of my responsibilities, meeting the limited expectations of those around me.

It's funny now, years later, I am no longer sure this alienation has ever left me. I wonder if it could explain what I have been doing, how I could come to step so far outside my ordinary life, a way of understanding that I had to do something so extreme just to know that I was still alive, when so little else seemed to matter very much. It would not excuse me, but it might help explain. I'd like to understand how I could come to do something that seemed wrong to me even at the beginning, whether it signifies something evil in me, or whether it is just ordinary.

I certainly do not want to excuse myself. I do not want to pretend that what I have done is forgivable, though I know too that this refusal could just be another piece of self-dramatisation. This kind of knowledge is useless. So I turn on myself, unable to make meaning from the procession of facts, my actions. And while I can turn these things over and over in my mind, what remains amazing to me in these grim latter days is that I once managed to cut through this alienation and inertia and bring that first marriage to an end. I have to think I had reached the point where there seemed

nothing else I could do, no other turning I could take.

There was one night, we had been out to dinner with friends who lived just down the road. I had already told Marianne, several times I think, that I thought our marriage was over, but could not face the cascade of consequences, not then. Because I could not bring myself to move out we were living in a state of attrition. She was pretending (or at least, I thought it suited her to pretend) that my misery was some whim which had entered my head and if ignored and occasionally stamped on would go away. This attitude puzzled me, because she was a passionate woman, and I would have expected her to reject me furiously, to demand that I leave, however difficult that would have made the practical details of the way we lived. I don't even think it was the practical detail that weighed on her, but I believe now it reflected her true indifference to me, as if she had better things to think about. Whatever her reasons I had accepted her reaction, feeling the whole time I was lying to myself and probably everyone else and not caring. It was easier than facing the end, or so I thought, until I came to the point where I could no longer bear this misery. It happened on this night, resistance or restraint weakened by alcohol. I had wanted to leave the dinner earlier and had said so, but she ignored me, drinking on. I became steadily, quietly angrier and when we finally stepped outside, safely away from our hosts' hearing, I said something. I do not remember what it was, but it set her off. We walked the half mile home with Marianne screaming at me, like a mad woman, shouting in incoherent rage about men being bastards and everything that was going to happen to them, or perhaps to me alone. I had heard all of this before, seen this furious wretchedness before, but something broke in me then, and I felt there could be no turning back. It might not have been true, but it seemed a certainty. I said nothing while she screamed, my head down as we walked. When we got back to the house (we had a large detached house in those days) I looked up at its black bulk rearing up in front of us, the little pool of light around the front door, and I loathed it.

The hatred was like a spasm, a momentary reflex, but it was another step away from her, an acceptance that I could not continue with what we had. I pushed the key into the lock, controlling myself and letting us both in. She had fallen quiet as we walked up the path, but it started again when we got inside. Her movements were looser,

exaggerated by the effects of the alcohol, and I remember how her jaw moved, open and slack with the slurring of her words, and I remember how much I hated her then, not listening to her words but watching her uncertain balance as she moved around the kitchen. I watched her and then found the will to speak, and I told her, just go to bed. My voice seemed to surprise her, pulled her up. She looked at me and said

"You can fuck off too."

She was pushing middle age, but she had kept her good looks. For a while she put on weight, after our youngest son was born, but she had hated herself like that and after a year had restored her body to a form she felt comfortable with. It's strange that we can speak this way, as if we were somehow detached from the things happening below our eyes. She had kept her looks and seeing her sway in our kitchen I found her revolting. I understood it was not a physical repulsion. She had become a black hole on the close limits of my life, drawing me into her, down, and watching her mouth move it was like the opening of that black space, a terrible gravity threatening all I wanted to be, the light of the future closing down as the blackness seeped out of her, enveloped me. I shook my head, trying to jolt myself out of this feeling, trying to see the moment for what it was. The kitchen furniture swayed with me, because I was a little drunk myself. I told her to go away, again, looking down at the floor. I knew she would be different in the morning and that this abuse meant little enough in itself. Still there was a part of me, which became the decisive part of me, just wanting to put these moments out of my life, wondering why I had to go through this. She did not respond directly, but the drunkenness took over, and she gave up, staggering out into the hallway for the stairs.

Nothing had really happened, and yet it seemed like a turning point. I sat down at the kitchen table, and put my head in my hands. I heard another footstep, and looked up anxiously, tensing for another onslaught of abuse, but instead saw my eldest son, hesitating in the doorway.

Matthew was thirteen years old, approaching the milestones set by the law to define maturity, but I was thinking, given his age how could I begin to explain what I imagined my son had just heard? How could I begin to explain everything that lay behind it, and not least my own culpability? I felt suddenly sick, the sense of the ground or the table moving beneath me, that nonsense. And I wanted to hug Matthew

but he already seemed too big for this, like a proper teenager his limbs no longer quite his own.

“She’s drunk again Dad,” he said, looking straight at me. I wondered, is that all he saw, the drunkenness? I shook my head against my hands, my fingers pressing down as they slid over my cheeks, dropping to the table, and I could feel the skin of my face moving.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I told him. “I don’t know why, what point she reaches and it just takes over. I’m sorry you had to hear all that.”

Matthew shook his head.

“I’m not,” he said. “What’s going on Dad?”

I had been imagining this conversation, miserably, for months, how I would tell my children, how it would feel. I had imagined this conversation mostly as a way of convincing myself I should say nothing, at least until I was clearer about what was going to happen. Now I was floundering for the right words, my intoxication little help though maybe, maybe it helped me feel less inhibited about saying what I felt. There’s nothing like telling the truth to free your tongue, or mind, and still it was a frightening, vertiginous thing, every word like dropping a stone from a tightrope into darkness, the people I loved somewhere indeterminable below, the chance of such damage. I looked at my son, my lovely son, named Matthew but called Matty, that mark of closeness. I was trying to remember how the world had seemed to me at that age. Matty had always looked very much like me, a little slighter but everyone would say, he was his father’s son. We were alike but when I was his age the world had seemed much simpler. My parents had always appeared to love each other, and did so to their deaths, so close together. I never had reason to doubt their love.

“I’m afraid,” I began, “I’m afraid, well you must know that things are not good, not between me and your mother and maybe that’s why she’s drinking so much.”

Matthew nodded slowly.

“You’re right,” he said. “I guessed that much. But how bad is bad, or not good or whatever you want to say?”

It didn’t help that this was still a question I was asking myself, but I knew I had to drag up a convincing and helpful answer.

And I was back trying to understand the fault, when we had started out so hopefully. Who would get married with doubt? Why would you do that? I know well enough, people would say they were carried away with it, put the doubt on one side, but sitting with Matthew I wondered how much this was the vicious blessing of retrospection. You have to ask yourself, could you really stand at the altar, or in front of the registrar, or wherever it was you had chosen to make your feelings known, fingers crossed behind your back while you mouthed those solemn pledges, those hopeless lovely promises? By God I had meant it. I was very young and I knew little of what I could and couldn’t do, or the common failings of our lives. I knew about cynicism, but I wanted to defy it; I wanted to say I could love in a way that would defy our common failings, our common humanity, our sad mortality. I was after all only twenty-three.

Marianne was just another girl at a party, cruising around the fringes of graduate student life. I remembered her seeming glamour, because she had a job already and was making something of her life, her mark. Now I know that I was myself already set on a working path but it did not feel that way, not then. I was serious and convinced that I needed love to complete my life, and that this would happen. I had been in love with a girl at school and for a while she seemed to return it. We broke up as we each went to college, which was no surprise and no comfort. I blamed it on fate, and for a while I felt tragically serious, instead of ordinarily so. Then I put it behind me, and it changed little about my mind. You lose your virginity and nothing’s ever the same again, except that it doesn’t really feel that way. It feels like it’s just gone behind you and doesn’t matter any more. I met Marianne and after a short while became convinced she was all I had dreamed of. She seemed to feel the same, though I know now she had different reasons. These were the differences you were happy to ignore, hell bent on happiness.

We were married within a year.

You make these decisions, for good reasons at the time and you live with the consequences, literally, though most of the time they just feel like your life, the things you have. But when I looked at my son in the kitchen, the air still fraught around us, even these simple things seemed more than I could begin to explain. They were part of the burden I wanted to keep from my children, and I did not know where else I could begin. I began.

“I’ve always thought ...” Was this true? No, I’d thought of it a few seconds ago, maybe pulling together some older ideas, and I had to tell himself it did not matter, that you said these things not because they meant anything but because they gave you time to find the next word, the meaningful one. I was not interested in every word, but only wanted to understand what I saw. I faltered, and continued,

“I’ve always thought that when you are a child you look at your parents and one of the things that makes them seem like parents is that they don’t seem quite human. I mean you don’t want to look at them like you look at other people, having weaknesses, contradictory but overwhelming feelings, things that reduce them. You want them to be there helping you to cope with these things yourself, which means they shouldn’t be troubled by them yourself. You don’t want to be troubled by them. And one of the things that happens as you grow up, one of the things that makes you grow up, is coming to the realisation that they do have all those problems, that they are still struggling with the same things you’re struggling with.”

I could feel Matthew’s eyes working over my face, as if he was trying to take in this information, make sense of it, or maybe he was looking for some other help. I realised I had not begun to say enough, and as I spoke, the vertiginous sense intensified, in my legs and stomach, even though I was sitting down, a fearful sense that the ground on which my life had been founded was falling away; looking back I realise this was in part a means of imagining what Matthew must be feeling. I struggled some more, trying to find a plainer way of speaking, and it seemed that meant not speaking my mind.

“If things haven’t been so good, well, there’s no if there, and I know too that this isn’t just another up and down period, not just one of those things we call bad times, I mean I think I have to say this is more serious. I think we have come to the point where we have no choice. Your mother, I have to say, does not agree, but I think we’ve reached the point where we have to separate.”

I wondered, what people are supposed to look like, what sort of faces they are supposed to make when they hear their lives are about to fall apart? I had been close to Matthew in an unreflecting way, taking his regard for granted, not taking too much notice of what he felt because there had never been much sign that his feelings were

different from everything you’d expect of a teenage boy. He did not crumple in front of me, but his face changed, and whether because of a father’s guilt or because he was sensing a deeper truth it was like his childhood fell away in front of him. Matthew’s worried, serious face looked back at me.

“Is that certain?”

“I think it is. I’ve been trying to understand, to think that it might be different, because God knows I don’t want to break up ... anything. But the way she was tonight, the way she has been so much, that’s just a sign, a symptom of what’s really wrong. It’s no one’s fault. It’s just what happens. It’s just what I was trying to say. When you get married, it’s a huge decision, a decision for the rest of your life, and you have to put your faith in your emotions to guide you. You’re saying to yourself that these feelings are so important that nothing will change them, and that’s lovely in its way. It’s the dream that makes marriage a noble thing, even if it’s an impossible dream. If you’re lucky it will work out, and you’re there hoping you’ll be one of the lucky ones, but of course most people aren’t so lucky and then you have to decide what you can do, whether you can put it right, or whether you can just put up with it, or whether you have to move on, try something else. That’s what I’m facing. Right now I don’t know how it will work out for us, but I have to do something.”

Matthew was nodding his head, as if he understood. We sat together for a while longer, said some more things, going over it, but you reach a point where you know there is nothing more to be explained or questioned, not for the moment, and still you want to carry on saying the things in your head, so you can be sure you were understood. I looked at my eldest son, and he realised this much, watching his face trying to understand. I told him I wanted to make everything alright and that all I cared about was his happiness, the happiness of my children. That was an exaggeration, I know, (few of us could care about so few people), but it felt true when I said it. It’s what I wanted to mean. Matthew was tired and I could see that too. I told him he should go to bed now, and try not to worry. I was still his father, even if the assumptions between us were quickly changing. I imagined it was a relief to the boy, the father slipping back into his role. Matthew seemed to relax and said that he would be alright he was sure, and that he wanted to sleep. I kissed him goodnight and sat

there for some more minutes, unsure what I should do. I did not feel I could face the bedroom even if she was asleep by now (I thought she should be asleep). You have these urges, the urge to make a dramatic gesture because you've been through an experience, and it seemed to call for some physical act or sign. And it's common too as you look around, the ordinariness seeps back into you and defeats you. I realised I was too tired myself to do anything but go to sleep. I pushed the chair back under the table, checked the door and switched off the light. I washed, got ready for bed.

She was half snoring, her breath thick and catching around her open mouth. I could smell the wine on her as I stepped through the darkness, finding the familiar way through the black shapes of the bedroom. I had to push her leg away from my side of the bed, but she did not wake. Lying in the darkness on my back and still tense remembering what had gone before I fell asleep thinking that I had to put an end to it. I had no idea how I was going to do this. I was frightened at the thought, and hated finding myself in this place.

Having drunk too much I fell asleep quickly despite the tension. Neither of us woke early. Our youngest son, Richard, would bring us tea on most Sunday mornings. Marianne encouraged this, as she had encouraged Matthew and our daughter Grace before him (Grace had mostly resisted the pressure). I had never cared much for drinking anything in bed but went along with it, The tea sat on our bedside cabinets getting cold while we dozed on. Then Marianne rolled towards me, and put an arm across me.

Half awake I had been wondering how she would be when we had to face each other again, what she would say. I had not expected this, though I should have done. She had always lived from one emotion to the next, swinging between extremes. I knew what would follow and my first thought was that I should get out of bed and away from her. I was revolted by the thought of having sex with her, and could not imagine why she would want this after the things she had said only hours before. But I knew that if I rejected her she would spend the rest of the day feeding on her anger and hurt. I did not think I could stand this. I told myself too that perhaps I was wrong, and that all she wanted was the comfort of a hug. I could give her that much, because it would cost me little, and was a small price to pay for a quiet day.

So I let her hug me. She did that, anxiously, pulling me tighter to her, repeatedly, and then she began to run her hands over me, over my buttocks and down the outside of my thigh. Perhaps at this point I should have twisted away from her. Perhaps I should have endured her anger, because it would have been fairer to let her know how I really felt, but I could not face it, and while my body was aroused I was trying to tell myself that it was only a fuck and it didn't matter because she was still my wife and it was not as if I was betraying someone else's faith in me. I was only betraying myself, or maybe her a little, and I certainly did not matter.

I was betraying myself and I felt it. Afterwards I rolled away from her and out of the bed. I was trying to ignore the sense of shame, telling myself that it was not deserved. I washed and dressed while she stayed in bed. That made things easier, not having to look at her. I could hear the TV on in Richard's bedroom, but the rest of the house was quiet. The kitchen seemed unchanged from the night before, everything in its place except where Richard had spilt water around the kettle. What else did I expect? I was telling myself that this was my home, that I had worked for it, that everything I had worked for was here, and I would make some coffee and feel better. When I opened the tin the warm smell of it alone revived me. I wanted to get on with my life.

I heard a clatter from the lobby area next to the kitchen. I thought it must be the cat, because there was a cat flap in the door from the lobby to the back garden. The unexpected noise was no cause for alarm, but then I was wondering why the cat had made so much noise. I crossed the kitchen to open the door to the lobby.

The cat was crouched in shadows towards the back of the room. It was a small space, with doors opening to a boiler room and toilet. The cat was a nondescript tortoiseshell thing with white markings on its face and paws. It was staring up at me intently, defensively, its body poised over the prostrate bird on the tiles beside it.

There was a white dove, lying on its back. Afterwards when I closed my eyes I saw again the intense whiteness of it, the contrast with the deep red gore spreading across its torn breast. The cat had begun to eat it, starting at the breast, but the bird was still alive. Its beak was opening and closing rhythmically, noiselessly, its visible eye blinking. I felt sick and screamed at the cat, thinking it would seize the bird and pull it back out through the catflap as it had brought it in, but the cat just sprang away from

the bird and fled through the flap by itself.

I do not like birds. I have never touched one. If the dove could still have flown I would have stepped back out of the lobby in terror and shut the door. I could not have gone back in there. As it was I looked down on the wretched thing, the pathetic movement of its beak as if it was gasping for breath and wondered how I could kill it quickly. If the cat had taken it there would have been no dilemma, no practical problem. I even thought for a minute about getting a spade and trying to cut its head off. I was desperate, not thinking clearly, because it was alive and there was this blood, the dark red blood oozing into its white feathers around the blacker gape of its open breast, the winking of its eye and noiseless cry.

I opened the back door and went to the garage for a spade, but by now I was only thinking about moving the dove. When I opened the door I saw there was blood running down from the catflap over the white paint. The cat was sitting on the lawn not far away. Returning to the lobby I put the spade as flat as I could on the ground and tried to ease it under the bird. It moved backwards pushed by the edge of the spade. I jerked it a little, felt the first weight of it, and though it moved a little further now it was sliding onto the spade. As I lifted it the head lolled over the front edge and I was afraid it would fall off again, the mess spreading everywhere. It was not heavy as I lifted it but my fear of its fall made it awkward. It did not move. I adjusted my grip, steadying myself with my arms and shoulders tense, then I backed out through the open doorway and turning carried the dove to the side of the garden, the shade of our large privet hedge. It slide from the spade. I did not look down again. The cat was already moving towards the discarded prey. There were no marks on the spade, or even on the floor of the lobby as I returned there, which surprised me. As I washed the blood from the door I could see the cat at the corner of my eye, his face lurching into the bird's breast, eating it greedily. I told himself that at least it would be dead by now.

I put the spade away and washed my hands. I looked from the water to my face in the mirror above the basin. I was forty years old and still it was the same face that had always looked back at me, aged of course but when you looked for the things that made the difference they were not easy to pick out. I thought about the dying bird, its moving beak and eye, and I felt sick. The image offered itself as some kind of symbol,

but in truth it was just something real, something that had happened, and I could not make sense of it. It did not mean a thing. All of this suffering was meaningless. It did not matter one way or another, so it might as well as stop.

I decided I would have to leave.

*A small child in the photo, holding a mother's hand, thicker hair in those days, a shy smile, awkward and thin in the face. Remember being always hungry, however much I ate. And I want to say, I look like I would not hurt a fly, but what would that look like? Hurting flies, that's exactly what young children do. Even Shakespeare said it, his wanton boys. You all know that famous line, don't you, from King Lear, or any anthology I should think. Not particularly cruel, just ordinarily curious, seeing how living things could react to pain, would shudder and stop. Nothing strange there, because I was with friends and doing what children have always done, playing with life, enthralled by it.*

*People often say they had a happy childhood, or maybe even an unhappy one. I wonder every time I hear that, what, do they mean every day was a happy day? Do they remember what it was to struggle or skip lightly from day to day, every day? Is it just that their memories have failed them? Never carefree, always worried about what would become of me, trying to determine my next best step. Don't believe in fate, and still I find myself wondering whether I have made any choices or just followed the easy option from stage to stage, the milestones of my life. It is not good enough to wonder. You have to decide about these things.*

*Decisiveness is a good thing, but killing another, however decisive, does not seem like an ordinary decision. Like to think I was not born to kill, and that this is a path I have chosen for myself. Perhaps other circumstances would have offered different choices, and yet this is an option carved out of nothing, only looking now for my opportunity, the right opportunity. This sounds like a career, but I'd prefer to think of it as a plummet.*

## **Commitment**

It was a quaint notion, that your wedding day should be the happiest of your life. She thought it probably went back to the time when marriage was the best a girl could hope for. It was anomalous then when so much else had changed, when women had finally managed to claim decent lives for themselves, that the tradition remained so strong. She knew capable and highly intelligent friends or colleagues who for six months before their weddings had seemed to think of little else, letting the business of making arrangements dominate their lives. Everything had to be right for the day. Perhaps it was because they knew they could not control what happened next. Claire would always have chosen a quiet ceremony for herself. Still scarred from the collapse of his first marriage, Robert also wanted little fuss. They asked only immediate family and closest friends, going from the registry office to a restaurant Robert had helped to redesign and refit.

If she was scornful of the idea that it might be her happiest day, she still wanted it to be a happy day. In the event everything had worked well. The registry office had been a little perfunctory, but in Claire's experience this was normal, whatever warmth and solemnity they tried to wrap around the proceedings. At the reception the restaurant staff lavished attention on them. The fact that she could see Robert's hand at work in the designed details around the room made the place seem somehow more personal. The food was good too, far superior to the usual wedding fare and the speeches, from Robert and his brother Michael, were polished and funny. She enjoyed feeling she was the centre of attention, and part of something quietly sophisticated. They had been constrained by circumstance but she felt that even if she could have chosen freely she would not have done things any differently. It was a happy day.

Robert looked radiant, his face literally, somehow shining, his skin smooth and bright. Mostly in his work he wore casual clothes, an open necked shirt and a tweedy jacket, the image of an architect of a certain age, right down to the elbow patches on his jacket sleeves. For the day he had bought himself a new suit and it took years from him. He looked like a little boy dressed by his mother, too self-conscious to be apparently comfortable, but also confident and proud of himself. She noticed how effortlessly he seemed to move and talk among their guests, far more easily than she

could ever have done, for she had always been awkward with small talk. In his speech he spoke of his good fortune, laughing about the chip shop, the little wooden fork of fate which had apparently helped to bring them together. When he sat down he leaned across to kiss her, pausing in front of her face for a moment while his eyes engaged hers, then leaning forward to complete the kiss.

“I love you,” he said simply.

And she could not help saying the first thing that came into her head. It came out of her mouth as she thought it.

“You’ve said that before.”

His face froze, as if he could not believe what he had heard. Then he relaxed, apparently deciding he must be mistaken, and then he grinned at her.

“And I shall carry on saying it, for ever and ever.”

She smiled back at him.

“That’s because you’re a big, soft romantic.”

“I’m not ashamed of that.”

“And I find it very touching.”

That morning, sitting in her mother’s flat, waiting around in her dressing gown, she had been surprised to find herself so nervous. She sat by the window while her mother moved behind her. Stella, a restless woman, thin with dyed dark short hair which brought forward her fine bones, was smoking as usual, a habit Claire disliked but could not object to in her mother’s own home. She had risen before Claire and was dressed in casual working clothes, which aged her. She came and stood by the window to look at her daughter. Her voice was deep and rasped a little from the smoke. She smiled. Her smiles always looked forced.

“This is the bit where I say it’s not too late to change your mind, and that you don’t have to go through with this,” she suggested pleasantly. Claire looked back at her, shaking her head. Stella went on.

“It’s a routine thing to say, but it happens to be true. The only happiness your father ever brought me was you, and children are always a mixed blessing. In any case you’re too old to be thinking about children, and I certainly don’t want to be a grandmother.”

The old woman sucked in her mannered way on her cigarette, turning her head to

blow the smoke out of the window. She probably thought she had irritated her daughter enough. Claire was irritated enough. She said

“When are you ever going to stop putting down my father? Why do you have to do this now, of all the times you could choose? And whatever you might think I’m well aware of what I’m doing here. It feels like a very big decision and so yes I’m feeling stupidly nervous, but it’s hardly irreversible is it? Just more painful later. And besides, it happens to be what I want.”

“So you’ve found love at last?”

Her mother prided herself on plain speaking, as she put it. That was her little joke, signifying how much she enjoyed irony. Claire knew her too well and did not rise to it, not then.

“I feel that I have, however much that surprises you, and I think that’s what counts. I think Robert’s a decent man.”

“Oh I think he’s a decent man,” Stella agreed. Her fixed smile curled a little more. “I think he’s even quite an interesting man, but that’s not my point. Why do you feel you have to be married at all? It’s hard living with other people. It gets harder as you get older, the more you’ve been living on your own. Are you sure you want to give all that up?”

“It doesn’t feel so much of a sacrifice. I get lonely.”

“Everyone’s lonely. It’s even worse when you’re with someone. And you have to ask yourself, if he’s been through all this before, and it didn’t work, why is he in such a hurry to do it again?”

Claire stood up.

“I can’t believe you’re saying all this.”

Stella shrugged.

“It’s my duty.”

Claire snorted, but her mother went on.

“I’m not saying I don’t like him. After all that would be a foolish thing to say on the threshold of your wedding. But I think he’s a dreamer, and that’s dangerous. From what I’ve heard him say there was nothing so extraordinarily bad about his first marriage, but because he’s a dreamer it fell short of his expectations, and he couldn’t

bear it. I think you could be hurt by his dreams, and it might have been better for both of you if you had chosen to live apart and only see each other all the time. It's not so crazy in this day and age."

"I have to get dressed," Claire said coldly.

Claire had liked her father. He was an amiable, rather feeble man, and Stella had dominated their lives. It was how she had to operate, but Claire thought her mother had come to despise him for failing to stand up to her. It was unpleasant to think so much about your parents' feelings for each other, and what could have gone wrong. The wounds were still too raw, even after so long. He had surprised them by walking away, just after Claire had gone to college. She wondered now if he had been biding his time and the misery of his life with her mother for no reason but the well-being of his daughter. Claire would never have guessed this, but it seemed likely with hindsight. He left Stella for another woman, a little older than him, but then it seemed he had waited too long. He died suddenly three years later. Her mother continued to speak contemptuously of him whenever she could, though Claire had to insist that she did not come to the funeral. It had been a nasty fight. Claire had liked what little she had known of her stepmother, but she had married again and their lives moved in separate ways.

All the same Stella's weighted words about Robert touched her. There was enough truth in them, especially the question about why his first marriage had become so intolerable. She had met Marianne a few times now and been treated with some disdain, but she could only have expect this. Marianne also seemed bright and sociable, funny even. When Claire pressed Robert he would only say that they had such a different set of values they could not live together. He was not talking about politics, or ethical values, but something subtler, and more about their different sense of what mattered from day to day, what was worth discussing and what was worth making a fuss about. He said it was like water on a stone, wearing away at his love for her until there was nothing left.

She was not sure about this, about whether it explained enough. At other times he would say they had never really adjusted to the birth of the children. It was a common problem. She understood that parenthood might change you, and that beyond your

interest in the children you might find you had little left to say to each other. She had seen it happen to others. Perhaps Robert made less of this just because it was so common and he liked to think there was something more heroic or tragic about his life. This vanity amused her, while the fact that he had mentioned the change brought by the children at all seemed significant. She was still looking for clues.

None of this could help her understand why she herself had decided to accept marriage. She understood why Robert had asked her. Her mother was right in saying he was driven by his romanticism, his belief in the possibility of sharing his life, his fear that unless he could do so his life would be somehow incomplete. She did not feel this strongly herself. She may have done once but it had been driven out of her, being on her own. All the same she knew she had come to want something different. She had meant it when she spoke of loneliness.

Perhaps it was just that they had reached the point where some extra commitment was called for. Perhaps she had sensed that without that extra commitment they would inevitably drift apart, and she had found she did not want to let him go, not yet. She wanted to know more. She found she missed him on the evenings she did not see him. She loved just to sit with him, often in silence. When they went to bed together she felt sudden surges of affection for him, which made her want to say out loud that she loved him. Then his eyes would narrow and twinkle and he would say that he loved her too, and kiss her eyelids or face some more. She had only limited experience of men but she had never known one so gentle or apparently thoughtful. She was not sure if she could say whether feeling this much meant she was in love with him. She did not know what the sum of her feelings meant, or whether they even needed to be thought of together as making sense, guiding what she should do. She only knew she did not want it to stop, and that seemed a good enough reason to say yes to him.

She took comfort too from the fact that he had not been unfaithful to his wife. He might have struggled to explain himself, but he had not betrayed her.

Stella had finished her cigarette. She flicked the stub out onto the balcony through the French doors. She watched its flight through the doors and for the first time that morning Claire heard the sea, for the first time attending to the bright sun and the warm light. There must have been a wind at work, the rush and hiss of the waves on

the shingle more urgent, rhythmic than on a calm day. She thought she would like to be down by the sea, feeling its spray and breathing in the salt air, calming herself, but there was no time. Stella pursed her lips.

“I suppose it’s time for us to get dressed.”

Claire nodded, and stepped towards her, so she was closer to her but still could not touch her. She wavered between the desires to hug her or strike her. She only wished it could have been a simple hug, but nothing was simple with Stella and Claire herself had always found it difficult to make public gestures of affection. That was why she had been so surprised at herself in bed with Robert. She said carefully

“You’re quite wrong mother, if you think I don’t know exactly what I’m doing.”

Her mother laughed.

“So you think you’re in love with him and that’s all that matters?”

Claire shrugged.

“I don’t think that at all, and that’s not what I’ve been saying.”

Stella shook her head, and Claire braced herself for some cutting contradiction. Stella surprised her, and shrugged herself.

“I hope you’re right. I’m glad that you’re in love with him, but you should never be ruled by your heart. It’s the worst guide in the world. I’d have been surprised at you, at your age, if you had.”

Now Claire felt exasperated.

“I’m getting married mother. I’m trying to be as wise as I can about it. I’m trying to know everything that’s in my heart, and what else have I got to go on?”

“Nothing at all.” Stella was shaking her head, crossing her arms, looking out to sea. “We’re all fools to our hearts. If you’re wise you’ll never set your expectations too high but you’ll pay a price for that too. I know all about this and I can’t stop you hurting yourself, though since you’re not a mother you wouldn’t know how that feels.”

On an ordinary day Claire would have walked away from her then. She agreed with her about managing expectations, but could not bear to be so patronised. It would not have been the first time she had left rather than confront her. Stella seemed to enjoy provoking her, but on this day of all days, her perfect wedding day, she could not let such rancour into her heart. She had to be polite. She needed her mother’s help to get

dressed. Claire bowed her head and said they had to get on with it.

While Stella helped her she could not avoid touching her from time to time. Claire had to stifle her revulsion at each touch. Now she was not sure she would have liked to have been able to hug her. There was another world, the life she did not have, the family life she had never had.

How could it have been the best day of her life? She had been in too strange a mood, and perhaps this explained her remark about love to Robert. She tried to put the remark behind her, a little ashamed of herself, telling herself she had meant nothing by it and maybe that was true. It had just come out. She was glad that Robert seemed happy to forget it, or maybe he just forgot it.

They had cleared some tables from the middle of the restaurant to create a rough and ready dance floor. The party had been planned to end quietly with the departure of Robert and Claire, but they had agreed that it could be a happy end to the formal proceedings if they had some slow romantic dancing.

It seemed right. Claire had chosen the first song: Roberta Flack’s version of *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*. She had only limited interest in music, and had struggled to think of a tune that would mean something to her. The song had framed a soft-focused sex scene in the film *Play Misty for Me*. She had seen it as a teenager and the scene had stayed in her imagination. She thought, she could enjoy her dreams as much as anyone as long as she never confused them with reality. The song had become her obvious choice, the nearest thing she had to a favourite. She got up awkwardly when she heard the first bars of the music, knowing what was expected of her, Robert now standing with his hands out and open to her, waiting for her. She took his hands and let him pull her to him, a step forward from their first encounter by the harbour wall. He felt very warm in her arms. For a moment she squirmed to feel the eyes around the room on her, but she told herself that they were smiling, wishing her well. As Roberta Flack’s voice swelled, as she sang the first time ever I lay with you Robert pulled her closer and pressed his fingers into her shoulder blades, his cheek against hers, unusually smooth for that time of day. If anything this had been the designed climax of the day. She let it happen.

As the song finished she looked up and saw Robert’s children looking straight at

them. Robert had talked to them early about his wedding plans and they had said together that they wanted to come. Matthew had said he wanted to see his father happy. Now they were smiling, clapping with everyone else. The boys looked sweet and uncomfortable in their shirts and ties, while Grace had taken on her mother's beauty in her formal dress, looking suddenly like a young woman (which was hardly true). She thought they seemed lovely, quiet but anxious all the same to show her that it would be alright, to talk to her and be friends with her. She struggled to understand what might be going through their minds, but she was glad for their apparent warmth and wanted to return it without presuming too much. As the song finished and the applause broke out she went over to them, closely followed by Robert. Matthew was drinking a small lager, while Grace and Richard each had a full glass of cola.

"Are you having a nice time?" she asked them. It was a bland thing to say, and she expected a bland response. Moving from behind her Robert took her hand, deliberately making this significant gesture in front of his children, and Claire thought, we have already done this, we've just been dancing in each other's arms in front of them. They should have been long past such sensitivities, and then she reproved herself. Robert would always have that other life, his past demanding acknowledgement and amends. No one reached middle age without some kind of baggage, no one worth knowing. It defined him now, and she had to accept it as part of what he was. She took comfort from the fact she knew all this and had already come to terms with it. She let him squeeze her hand.

They went that night to a small hotel on the esplanade at Sandgate. A week in Crete was booked from the following day, and it had seemed inappropriate to go back to the flat they had been sharing for the last few months.

There was a balcony outside their bedroom. They leaned together on the railing, watching the sun drop over the marsh beyond Hythe. The sea had taken on a dense, grey blue sheen, while the cloud-streaked sky stretched over it, a deep pink around the sun oozing through the streaks of the clouds to yellow then blue where the night sky crept up from the sea's far horizon. This was not new to them; they had often walked out to the western end of the Leas to watch the sun go down, but it compelled them still, endlessly varied, meaninglessly moving, abstract as something primeval and

fundamental. They had some champagne on ice in a bucket beside them on the balcony, and the flutes in their hands as they leaned forward on the railing. Robert raised his glass to the light, looking at the glass. She saw the pink light filter through it from the sky, gleaming through the steady rise of the bubbles, and she lifted her glass towards him. He shifted his weight to face her.

"I haven't said," he began, apparently looking for the words, "I don't think I ever said how much in the worst days with Marianne, when everything was coming to an end, I don't think I ever really said how dark everything seemed, and I often wondered why I was doing it, going through so much misery when I couldn't see that things might get better on the other side, if I ever got to what I wanted, a life apart from her. Some of that blackness stayed with me, until I met you, and today, I just wanted to say because I don't think I've said it, just wanted to say thank you, thank you for giving me another life."

She nodded, hearing him, feeling flattered and pleased. She tapped her glass against his, echoing his toast, "to us", watching the darkening sky, and then she let him kiss her.

## Electricity

It was an age ago, a different life, though I know it was my life, sitting in the Ship in Sandgate, down the hill from our house.

It was an evening out with Marianne, when the children were still young but away for the weekend with my brother's family. It felt as if we had our old lives back for the weekend, which is why we did nothing special. We did not go out to eat, but we went down to the pub on a Friday night as we would have done before the children were born. It had been a hot day in a hot summer, the night air so close and heavy that it felt it must break soon into a storm. We sat in the pub with the doors open, but there was no breeze, the noise of the street breaking into the smoky red light around the tables where we sat.

I cannot remember what we talked about through the evening. It must have been unimportant. I imagine it would have been about domestic things, about the children or the new house. We had only moved down to Folkestone that spring, and were still getting to know it. Though I had lived in Kent as a child I had not known much about the town before and was warily, happily discovering its charms. I had been in the Ship a few times and liked its old fashioned, improvised atmosphere, the sense that the place looked much the same as it must have done for decades, no slot machines or screens to break the flow of conversation about the place, though there was quiet music from a speaker in the ceiling by the bar. Perhaps we talked about the pub, or Sandgate, its pretensions as a village, even though it ran seamlessly into the town, or the defining presence of the sea. It would have been this kind of talk because we already knew each other so well that there seemed little point in discussing our feelings about life in general. It had all been said before. Both of us already knew what the other would think, and we had already defined the limits of our interest in each other; we knew where we could go and what we should avoid. We had to look for new things, our new home, or current affairs, the events around us.

It was unimportant. It did not affect what happened next, whatever we talked about. You think it should do, that one thing probably followed another, and you try to summon the details back by flexing your will. But I know it wasn't like that, not then. We had both felt the pressure to be together, the obligation to spend time together,

and that we should have felt this as a pressure was probably a sign that things were beginning to go wrong between us. You would have thought the night might have ended in an argument, but it was worse, and spontaneous, and it left me feeling desolate.

The Ship usually closed late in those days, after the legal time. We stayed till the bar staff were throwing people out, past midnight. It was still warm. I was wearing an open shirt, Marianne a T shirt and loose wraparound skirt, her legs bare. As we stepped out of the pub there was a warm breeze, sprung up from somewhere out at sea, caressing us and the night felt less ominous, for a moment, until the whole sky flashed with distant lightning, too far away for thunder yet. It made the sky, the night feel organic, alive, literally electric. Marianne had grabbed my hand, pulling me along beside the pub, down towards the beach. The sea's breath pushed through the parted teeth of the shore in the warm breeze, its lulling drag around the pebbles on the edge of the water. There was no moon, no cloud, but the knocked-back glitter of the stars, blanked out by the sporadic flashes of the lightning. The stragglers from the pub, or the other bars in the village, had left the streets, the beach empty even of night fishermen in either direction, at least as far as I could see.

"What are you doing?" I asked, letting her pull me further over the shifting stones, down towards the tumbled blocks of rock that broke the line of the beach, reaching down into the sea. She shook her head and said nothing, pulling me on, down, until we were by the rocks.

"What are you thinking?"

Still there was nothing. She was not looking at me. The sky blanked an electric white, soaking her turned head in the glare. Then we were in the warm, soft darkness again. Past her face, past the vague moving surface of the sea, there were the lights of the distant shore, another country, a place I remembered as foreign once, the alien feel of the signage the first thing I'd seen as I crossed the Channel with my parents on childhood camping holidays. That strangeness was gone now, northern France a place I had been so often for shopping and short breaks that it seemed only part of my life. Everything seemed to go that way, the exciting dulled by familiarity. We become dull with the ease of our lives.

I could not say I was thinking this then. It came from reflection, the way things take on meaning. I saw the lights then, probably thought how clear the night must be and I do remember thinking, that it was odd, because immediately around us though you could make out the shapes and see the colour of the beach pebbles immediately, their night-time colours, this was a trick of the light when the night air had draped everything in a thick brown hue, a heaviness with the heat only ripped away for moments by the lightning flashes. Somewhere down the Channel, far south, there was the rumble of the storm's thunder. I was wondering whether it would come closer, whether the storm would break over us, the hot night. You could never be sure of how it would move. Though the night was close it did not feel as if it was about to break, not with the breeze. It's funny how we still seem to be able to sense these things, an animal thing. Marianne leaned first against the rock and then let herself slip down against it. She was looking at me now, holding up her hands to take my hands once more.

"What is it?" I asked her again. "What do you want?"

I had given her my hands, and she pulled me down towards her.

"I want you to kiss me Rob," she said, "like we used to kiss, out on the street, or anywhere, when you knew me first."

My first impulse was to protest and refuse, but she was pulling me down. I was surprised, unready for this, rather than unwilling and so there was never any chance I would refuse. She had slumped right down and was lying on the beach beside the overshadowing rocks. Perhaps my hesitation came from the awareness that others might see us, the risk of it but I was becoming excited and losing interest in their possible passing, a little drunk I was for sure. I had gone down on my knees and then full length beside her, half on her, leaning over her, the hard pebbles shifting beneath my elbow and hip, but then seeming comfortable, their hardness seeming to go as they shaped themselves around me. I was kissing her on, in the mouth, as she had asked and then insisted, like we had not kissed since those earliest days. The thunder boomed louder and threatened, but still far away. My right hand was moving over her, down onto her naked leg, and I felt her skin tense, beginning to tremble.

The kissing transformed the night. It's perverse, how ready we are to accept kissing

in public, and think nothing when it is shown in films or anywhere; after all it's not like fucking, we tell ourselves, not the real consuming thing, as if it was safe and acceptable because we don't have to lose control, as if we were frightened mostly at the loss of that control, its indignity. But you could say kissing is the most intimate thing we can do to each other, this opening of our mouths to each other, this the most open we can ever be to the physical reality of our inner selves. It is the most basic gesture, the earliest thing a baby does to try its consciousness against the world, putting things in its mouth, as if taking something into yourself could solve your bafflement at the otherness of the world. In that meeting between lovers of inner flesh, soft tongues and saliva, that is where we go first but so deeply to try our longing to end the difference between us.

Through the years, with our love making, I had kissed Marianne routinely, increasingly through habit or expectation, the motions we all go through. It was common enough, and yet that night the familiarity fell away. It was as though we had found each other again, becoming passionate on the pebble beach, hard and malleable beneath us as she pushed me over onto my back, pulling down her pants and lifting her skirt free from the twist of her legs. I had undone my trousers, eased them with my pants over my erection, down to the top of my legs, the least that I could do and still it felt bold and mad with my hard cock out in the air, that warm air, an outrageous, fantastic thing to do. She took hold of it, pulling the skin up and down quickly as if making sure, then took it firmly, sliding her thighs over my thighs, took me into her. Her skirt fell over the exposed skin of my thighs. My buttocks were exposed on the cool shingle, but for the rest of me, I was enveloped by the heat of her, palpable. She was squatting on her folded thighs, sitting up from me with her hands by her sides, her back to the sea. The lightning lit her up again, followed more closely this time by the thunder, and she gasped, sighed as if with the sea, its rush and lap on the shore, drawing me into her, the warm darkness sliding over me.

Later I wondered if this was how it had been when we first made love, but I could not really remember. Naturally I remembered the time, the place, and even that I was nervous before we started. She had seemed so confident, so sure of herself. And though I could not really remember how it was I knew it worked for us then. If as we got used

to each other we made love less often, I did not know if it was the passing time, the force of familiarity but I felt the loss. There was always so much else to do, and then the children were so often in the way, and after a while it seemed to matter less and less, a part of our lives we had explored and which mostly now had all the charm of the harbour in Calais.

So I had come to think, but there was her face above me, beginning to twist with the effort and tension as the orgasm rose in her, as beautiful as she had always been and again the lightning flash picked out the line of her cheek as her face turned from side to side and the thunder reverberated in the air, and this moment felt as if it could change everything, as if we could be alive again.

It was over for us together, more or less. She slumped forward, her hands on my shoulders and then head on my shoulders and she began to giggle. I laughed with her, but was uneasy again, becoming conscious again that we were not far from the path and that someone, anyone might come along. At least now I could zip up and pretend that this was no more than lovers kissing, respectable or perhaps just tolerable. I thought, for all my occasional imagined adventures I had never done anything like this in my life, and here I was behaving with my wife as if we were lovers. It seemed a good idea. I thought it was a good idea but it did not make me feel easy.

She stood up, pulling on her pants while I sorted out my trousers. The base of my spine was sore where it had chafed against the pebbles. There was still no sign of other human life on the beach. I could hear the sound of cars on the main road, back behind the pub, but out here there was nothing, or just themselves. This too seemed right, but did not help my sense of discomfort.

There is after all, nothing like intimacy to make you feel how far you have grown apart. I was struggling to understand, to tell myself what I felt, regaining my senses on the shore. She had already started to walk away from me, along the beach towards Sandgate Hill and the climb back up to our house in Folkestone. Although the thunder still lurked in the air the crunch of her shoes on the pebbles was the loudest sound in the night. I began to follow her.

I imagined such moments shape our lives, and certainly they punctuate them. If I could not remember exactly how it was in our early days together at least I could

remember when it was. That night on the beach, I could say for sure that the way I remembered the light from the storm on her face was true. I could not say whether or not I had imagined it, knowing there was a storm and that the rest of it happened too, that the facts were in place.

It would be wrong to say it was the beginning of the end, because I knew at the time it seemed wonderful and positively disturbing. I remembered thinking shortly afterwards that it showed the magic was still there, and that come what may as a couple we had to find a means to preserve it, to notice how it worked between us and spend more effort nurturing it.

But the days had slipped away from me, and whatever I chose to remember was tinged with whatever I would like to remember. We make sense of our lives as we go along and we instinctively look to our pasts to guide us, hoping that experience will give us the best context for understanding the present. But too often we let the present reshape our sense of the past, bringing a further distortion to what we know of ourselves now. This is how our past becomes truly lost to us. We hang on to the fact. I do know that this wild lovemaking never happened again, and I had tried to understand why this was so, but it made no sense. We stayed together for many years after that night on the beach, and because it never happened again I have been tempted to think it was the point where something broke between us. I am not even sure what the something was. Perhaps it was in Marianne's head, or maybe even mine and I could not work it out. Of course I knew none of this at the time. I hurried over the difficult shingle to catch up with her, happy like a puppy, as men can be, and still disturbed, hurrying to be close to her so I could claim the reassurance of being with her. She turned round as I approached and smiled, and that seemed enough. I had no idea of what was going on in her head, and I did not dare to ask her. We never spoke of it, not until years later.

It did not happen.

*Want to do something, why not follow it through? What to stop you? The fear of apprehension (the apprehension of fear?), punishment? That might be a reason, but I'm not talking about these things. Want to know, because we have a need to know, a right to know (be so bold), why if you want to do something terrible, who is to say it is so terrible? Not your victim, because she'll be dead. She got in your way and paid the price. That's life after all. We think we have a right to life, love and happiness, but that's only because we're so comfortable, so complacent. For most people on this earth there is a brutal other reality. People get swatted like insects, our disregard for life.*

*Used to sleep in the attic of our house, my little private, dream home, the place I dreamed. One night sitting up late, reading quietly, like I did, and I happened to look up. There was a mouse in the doorway, sniffing around the doorway in the poor light. Wanted to say, come in, come in, I won't hurt you, but as soon as it sensed me it darted backwards, out of sight. Then two nights later it did the same thing, and as I called it, it was gone. I began to fantasise about the mouse, how I would feed it small food, make it trust me, make it be my friend, revealing my strange unique affinity with the animal world, the mark of how different I was from the rest of mankind, or at least most of them. Thought the mouse would know this, and come to trust me. For a while longer I found signs of it about the place, or glimpsed it, and this fed my dreams, but it stopped coming. Perhaps it died, shrivelled and dried under some floorboard, or perhaps my parents killed it, or the cat did. Animals, we use them as we want, for pleasure or company or food or clothes, or just to satisfy our curiosity, and when they get in our way, we get them out of our way.*

*Not sentimental about their loss. Just want to be consistent about our carelessness. It's not a grudge I carry. It's nothing personal.*

*No, I'm sorry. That's less than the truth. Want to live in the truth of my feelings, and if I was true to my feelings I would take her in my hands, her neck in my hands, to see the fear in her eyes and know, beneath my fingers the warmth of her life, her warm skin and the blood pulsing through it, the fullness of life and to know that this life is in my hands, well there would be an honesty, an extinction with the passing of the moments, a kind of relief. She would not have seen it that way, but I would be doing her a kindness, putting her out of her misery. Welcome that end, an end to having to think about this shit.*

*Not that I know her at all. Perhaps it's nothing personal after all.*