

Sunset

The living-room of a house in Snowdonia, the Lake District or the Scottish Highlands. A side-table by an empty armchair. Pill-boxes, a tv remote, books, newspapers and other things scattered here and there.

A woman in her sixties is looking out of the window. During the play she tidies the room but her mind is elsewhere. At critical moments she stops to watch the sunset; meanwhile the play the light fades until the stage is almost dark except perhaps for a table lamp or two.

WOMAN:

Another beautiful evening, David. The sky pale, pale blue with clouds like candy floss.

Remember when we first moved here? Every evening I'd come in here to watch the sun go down. The first few times you joined me. Then you said one sunset was like any other and you had better things to do. I probably did too. But it's an old woman's privilege to do what she wants, especially if what she wants is to do nothing at all. Besides, why else had we moved here, if not for evenings like these? So I'd sit by myself and watch the day end. Only the last few months have been different, you beside me, holding my hand as the light fades and the mountains disappear.

Do you remember the first time we held hands? Our first date. I'd asked you to take me to the fun fair and you were not impressed. You were a young lawyer with ambition, not a teenager with nothing to do. But you took it in your stride. "Sure," you said and off we went.

It was the middle of summer. The hottest day of the year. You were sweating and trying not to show it. Children all around us screaming, but I didn't hear them. All I saw and heard was you, five foot ten, slim and handsome, quiet and polite. Pigheaded too, though it took me time to find that out. I wanted to go on the roller coaster and you

pretended it was a good idea. You waited till I was seated with my skirt tucked under me, then you got in, pulled down the safety bar and, without even asking, took my hand.

Of course other boys had held my hand. But they only wanted one thing. One hand around my shoulder, casually reaching down. The other slowly moving up my leg. None of them got as far as they wanted, although two or three got close. I didn't blame them. I envied them. Girl or boy, when you're that age your body and emotions pull you this way and that. I wanted to do what they were doing, give them what they wanted, get what I wanted myself. But back then, it was hard for women. There was the pill and Free Love but you still didn't know what was right - right for you, right for your boyfriend. Or your parents waiting at home. So I just sat tight and did nothing and hoped that was the right thing for me.

But you didn't try anything. Your hand just sat there, holding mine like it was saying I'm here if you need me. I liked that. Even when we were tearing down that slope and rushing round every curve, jerked this way and that, you against me, me against you, me having the time of my life, you pretending you were having fun, the biggest thrill I had that day was your hand holding mine.

How old were you? Twenty-eight. I was twenty-two, still a virgin, living at home. There we were in the same office, like in some film. Me a new secretary, you a lawyer with a reputation for being difficult. Dark eyes and one of those thick moustaches that were fashionable then. Everyone knew you had a girlfriend so I wasn't interested. Then one lunchtime you told me you had broken up. From then on I looked at you every time you passed my desk and you looked right back. The next thing I knew, we were on that roller coaster.

There, the first hint of pink. The blue darkening. The sun hanging between the clouds and horizon. Warm and golden. It never stays, does it? Sunsets should last for as long as

we want them. A day like today should never end. We should stay here forever, you and I.

Maybe you haven't sat with me, but I've never watched a sunset alone. You've always been somewhere in the house. And as the last light faded and I sat here in darkness, I always felt you beside me, so close that my hand never needed to reach for yours.

I never told you. Such things embarrassed you. Words lied, you said. They said too little or too much. I thought you meant the words lawyers use in documents and court, but I was wrong. You respected those words; they were so transparent. No, the words you distrusted were the ones we use on the phone, in the street, with strangers and friends. Words that tumble out of our mouths. Words that come without thought or with malice. It was better to say nothing than to say the wrong thing. So you said little – and I said little to you.

You did say you loved me. On our wedding day. Once or twice before. I didn't mind. I was happy. In my new job. At home with you. In bed, where we made love, no matter how little we said.

I never regretted that there was no-one before you. It made you love me more. On our wedding night, I was scared that I wouldn't please you, but you were so kind and considerate. It seemed that our marriage was going to be perfect. And for a few years it was.

Then the children came and changed my life. They lost me my job and my freedom and they almost lost me my husband. I wish I could have loved them all from the first moment I felt them stir. Equally, blindly, overwhelmingly. I tried, God knows I tried, but it wasn't joy they brought me; it was responsibility and resentment.

The children turned me into my mother. Every morning she stared at me from the bathroom mirror. When I spoke to them, it was her voice I heard. I loved my mother but I wanted to be myself. But with each nappy I washed and every tantrum I soothed, I felt myself slipping further and further away.

You, David, lucky man, were the ideal father. You loved the children neither too little nor too much. At the end of each day you gave them your time and attention and never understood how much I wanted to be free of them and free of our home. The dark airless rooms and tiny bathroom in our flat. The house that was always cluttered with their noise and toys. When there was only Tom and he was asleep you and I could still be alone, but after Richard came there was never a moment when one of them was not awake and demanding our attention. Sometimes you helped with nappies or discipline, but it was never enough to free me of the burden of being a mother.

The pink has spread across every cloud. You never see it change, yet suddenly the sky is different. Like children. You suckle them every day and suddenly you realise they will never again grasp for your breast. Then I breathed a sigh of relief. Now, I wonder, I wonder...

For so many years I knew so little. I thought I was smart. I knew which of our neighbors had something to hide. Which of the children's teachers were all bluster and talk. At work I knew whether a client was serious or wasting my time. But it took me years to learn about your women.

The first I knew of was when Tom had just started school. Mary Something. Ironically, a woman divorcing her husband. One day I put two and two together – the nights spent away, the sudden affection you offered me – and suddenly I knew. The second – I never

knew her name – when Richard was in Primary Four. There were others, I'm sure, but I didn't want to know. I didn't want to rub salt into my own wound.

I said nothing. To you or anyone else. I didn't want to admit failure, or beg you to give them up. I wasn't sure what to do. Do you remember the summer when I read all those feminist novels? I thought I'd found the answer. I could walk out of our home, take the car or a bus or a train to some town I'd never been to before and start my life again. I would be free.

I thought about it for a week. I even looked out the clothes I would take. Wondered whether I should aim for London or Manchester. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't take the children and I couldn't leave them. There was no new life for me. I couldn't be free. I could only be me. And me was staying at home with you and the children. With a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach like on the roller-coaster, going down, down. Always down.

I never blamed you, David. Maybe you weren't the man I wanted you to be – the sensitive New Man who would Feel my Pain, but I had chosen you and you had kept most of the bargain. I had to lie on the bed I had made. Even if there were nights I was lying alone wondering who you were with and which of us had failed - me in keeping you or you in being faithful?

Yet you were faithful, in your fashion. You returned home each night, you paid the bills. You were never violent and seldom angry. You never threatened to leave.

Because you loved me, didn't you? Love has so many meanings and it changes so much. Or perhaps it is not love that changes but the one who is loved. I was no longer the pretty young woman you took to the fun fair with the smile you liked and a quiet

personality. I was your wife and housekeeper, the often sour-faced mother of your children. For that at least you gave me your respect.

Then you took me to dinner one night after Lisa started school and said off-handedly that if I wanted to return to work we could afford a childminder. I could keep whatever money I made. My first thought was how patronising: offering me pocket-money for make-up and clothes. Then I realised you were offering me my life back, my freedom. And I felt like shouting for joy. You just sat with an uncertain smile on my face, surprised how happy I had suddenly become.

It wasn't easy to find work, particularly with an estate agent who didn't want a forty-year-old woman who didn't know the business and hadn't worked for years. Harry tolerated me, gave me letters to type and only let me show properties when the others were busy. "The wife of a friend," he told prospective buyers. "Talk business with me." But I soon found my feet and took responsibility. Harry was surprised. The others too, as they saw their commissions slipping away. Life was fun, exhilarating. The roller-coaster climbing high.

I started my own business. Not just as an agent, but buying, selling and renting too. I wanted to be as good as that first mistress of yours. I proved myself her equal in more ways than one. Robert was as good-looking as Jeremy Irons in his heyday. Married, thank God, and unlike you, he could talk as well as listen.

I would call him when the office was empty. We would meet for lunch then go through the pretence of my showing him houses before checking into a hotel. The first few times I returned home guilty, horrified that I was betraying you and the children. Then I saw, as years before you must have seen, that we can keep our emotions in separate compartments. In the evenings and at weekends there were you and the children. The days were for Robert.

We might have married, if we had been single. He asked me once; we were both relieved when I said no. It ended soon after and I wondered about another affair. With someone different: a younger man or an artist; even a black man or foreigner, Italian or French. Of course they were fantasies. Too many people would notice. I even thought about a toy boy but he would have wanted too much or offered too little. Besides, by then you knew. An old letter from Robert at the back of a drawer.

You should have kept quiet. Because I would only confess to Robert when you confessed to your women. You denied it. Your voice rose. It was good to see you for once in your life expressing some emotion. Then Lisa came in. She was used to my anger, but not yours. You reassured her and put her back to bed. Tomorrow, we said; we'll talk about it then.

For the first time you called in sick and while the children were at school we were free to talk and yell – yes, my dear, you yelled – and accuse and defend. You insisted your women meant nothing. Why I should believe you, I asked, when you never tell me anything. I'm a man, you said, it's what men do. And what am I? I asked. My wife, you said. And is that praise or an insult, I wanted to know. For a moment you were confused. It's praise, you said. It couldn't be anything but praise.

Of course it didn't end there. It took months for you to accept that Robert was over, that there was no-one else. And for months I was suspicious of your every movement. There were long angry silences and weak accusations. The children knew what was happening, but didn't know who to blame. But in the end we reached a silent agreement, some kind of justice. Whatever we had done, we had tried to protect each other and the children. In our way, we had both been faithful.

The sunset has almost gone. There are only shadows and darkness, three dimensions reduced to two. Soon there will only be one. I should switch on a lamp, but not yet, my darling, not yet.

We picked up the pieces. Slowly we fell in love again. We were adults falling for the person we knew, not youngsters infatuated by the unknown. I saw it in your eyes, heard it in your voice. The kindness that for years had been little more than politeness became kindness again. I had a husband who was fifty, putting on weight and losing hair, who I did not see for most of the day. But he was a husband who loved me and had come back to me. A man with a sharp mind and a dry sense of humor. A few quirks – rugby internationals and a lack of dress sense - that I could easily tolerate. I only had to hear the complaints of friends and neighbours - he never washes, he drinks too much, he's too friendly with the neighbor's daughters - to remind myself how lucky I was.

Then one by one the children left home. At first we thought Tom would follow you, but he had neither the dedication nor the intelligence to study law. So we gave him a deposit for his flat and watched him try jobs and girlfriends until he married and became, of all things, a car salesman. A good husband and father in his own way but I can never look at him without disappointment.

Richard should have been the lawyer. Thoughtful, intense, hard-working. Like you, happy to be alone. Too alone. His focus was always elsewhere. He would disappear into his room and it would be so quiet I would think he had fallen asleep. I would go in and find him reading and he'd look up as if I was a stranger, hoping I would quickly go away. There was always something lost about him. I loved him most of all but he was always so distant that I could never reach him.

And Lisa. I thought that age and experience with the boys would make me a better mother, but she always seemed to be someone else's child, tolerating me only because

she had to. She had all the feminine vices and none of the virtues, always wrapping you around her finger. You let her get away with it, David, because you had no expectations for her. She was a girl and the youngest and didn't represent you the way the boys did. And so she grew up to be intelligent and empty-headed, popular, demanding and selfish, the most unlikeable of the three. The one who can never settle, always changing homes and jobs and never able to find a partner.

It had to be Richard. The child we loved most. Who drifted from school to university, to politics, to protest, to drugs and despair. The boy with no friends who saw injustice everywhere. The young man who was always alone. I knew about the drugs long before you did. "They're like alcohol or tobacco, Mum; they're ok if you know what you're doing." The most passionate I ever heard him speak. What do you say? How do you reach out to a twenty-three year old when you're over fifty and you have no idea the life he leads? How could I have stopped him? What could I have done? I saw the hurt. I never understood where it came from, I could never put it right, but I could see it, I could feel it. And he died from it, David, he died, he died!

It's all gone. You can't tell where the sky ends and the horizon begins. The end of the day. The start of a long, long night.

I'd never seen you cry before. But your eyes were damp at the funeral and later that day you shouted at Lisa when she said something typically insensitive. Then I heard you in the bedroom. I came in, you looked at me and tried to smile but could not stop the tears. I sat beside you and held you. All day I had cried for Richard. At that moment I was crying for you.

The next day you told me it was time to retire. I saw how old you had become. You thought I wanted to keep going, but I worked so as not spend my days alone. We could be proud of ourselves. Your partnership one of the best in the country. My portfolio

covering four counties. We quit and moved here, up in the hills with no people around us. We've had eight years together, eight wonderful years without work, without children. Time to read, to explore, to relax and develop new talents - your wooden ducks parading across the living-room wall, my primitive paintings stacked away. The end, I thought, of the roller-coaster ride.

Age buries personalities. A stranger looks at you and sees a crotchety old man. I see a hard-working individual, honest and in his way kind. A man wise enough to know what he has achieved and where he has failed. I see almost all of you: your skill with wood, your political views, your inability to express what you feel and so much more. And behind it all I see a handsome twenty-eight year old, tense with energy and ideas, a tentative smile, holding my hand.

Eight years of happiness before it began to crumble. Your stroke, gasping for breath, staring silent and helpless, as I waited for the ambulance to come. The ride through the night, the harsh light of the hospital. Thank God we got you out of there, brought you home. But how different, how uncertain life became. You were so tired, your words unclear. It was easier to communicate with silence and gesture. Then Tom and Lisa came back into our lives, insisting we move in with one or the other. I would have if you had wanted to, but you said no. You wanted to be here, alone with me. "That okay with you?" you wheezed. Of course it was, my love, of course it was.

How delicate you became, how dependent. At least the doctor and carers made house calls and between us we managed. I would have hated to leave you in hospital or have a stranger living here. I needed to be alone with you. So day after day you have sat here, dozing or reading or watching TV, while I sat beside you or bustled around. Every so often our eyes would cross. At times you would speak, but it was easier just to look and smile. I told myself it was not true, but you had begun to fade, the man I had loved for forty years was drifting away.

Today was the same as every other. In the morning I took you into the garden, suggested we cut down the dead laburnum. Over lunch we listened to *The World At One*. Once, you would have commented wryly on the day's events; today you said nothing. You slept for much of the afternoon as I worried over my canvas. I once said I take painting too seriously; nonsense, you told me, I was getting better.

I was in the kitchen when I heard the noise. I rushed in to see you half out of the chair. I strained to push you back, felt your weight, heard your faint breath. At last you were upright and I reached for the phone. But that moment you seemed to hiccup, your head fell and the light in your eyes died. I knew what was happening. I reached forward, felt for your pulse and caught your last heartbeat. "My darling," I whispered, "I love you, my darling, I love you, I love you, I love you," until you had gone. Then slowly I straightened up, kissed the top of your beautiful bald head and turned to see the first rays of sunset.

Now I have to call the doctor and who knows who else and Lisa and Tom. Lisa will break down and accuse me of bringing you home too soon from the hospital and Tom will try to take charge. There will be cars and footsteps and strangers will come into our home. They will measure you and wrap you and take you away. In a few days there will be the funeral, which I will hate, and eventually Tom and Lisa will return home. Then I will find myself back here alone, knowing, my darling, my husband, my love, that never again will I see you and never again will I watch another sunset.