

HALCYON

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SHORT STORIES

WEEK 11

GRAHAM  
SWIFT

## THE WATCH

Tell me, what is more magical, more sinister, more malign yet consoling, more expressive of the constancy — and fickleness — of fate than a clock? Think of the clock which is ticking now, behind you, above you, peeping from your cuff. Think of the watches which chirp blithely on the wrists of the newly dead. Think of those clocks which are prayed to so that their hands might never register some moment of doom — but they jerk forward nonetheless; or, conversely, of those clocks which are begged to hasten their movement so that some span of misery might reach its end, but they stubbornly refuse to budge. Think of those clocks, gently chiming on mantelpieces, which soothe one man and attack the nerves of another. And think of that clock, renowned in song, which when its old master died, stopped also, like a faithful mastiff, never to go again. Is it so remarkable to imagine — as savages once did on first seeing them — that in these whirring, clicking mechanisms there lives a spirit, a power, a demon?

My family is — was — a family of clockmakers. Three generations ago, driven by political turmoils, they fled to England from the Polish city of Lublin, a city famous for its baroque buildings, for its cunning artefacts — for clocks. For two centuries the Krepskis fashioned the clocks of Lublin. But Krepski, it is claimed, is only a corruption of the German Krepf, and, trace back further my family line and you will find connections with the great horologists of Nuremberg and Prague. For my forefathers were no mere craftsmen, no mere technicians. Pale, myopic men they may have been, sitting in dim workshops, counting the money they made by keeping the local gentry punctual; but they were also sorcerers, men

of mission. They shared a primitive but unshakeable faith that clocks and watches not only recorded time, but contained it — they spun it with their loom-like motion. That clocks, indeed, were the *cause* of time. That without their assiduous tick-tocking, present and future would never meet, oblivion would reign, and the world would vanish down its own gullet in some self-annihilating instant.

The man who regards his watch every so often, who thinks of time as something fixed and arranged, like a calendar, and not as a power to which is owed the very beating of his heart, may easily scoff. My family's faith is not to be communicated by appeals to reason. And yet in our case there is one unique and clinching item of evidence, one undeniable and sacred repository of material proof.

No one can say why, of all my worthy ancestors, my great-grandfather Stanislaw should have been singled out. No one can determine what mysterious conjunction of influences, what gatherings of instinct, knowledge and skill made the moment propitious. But on a September day, in Lublin, in 1809, my great-grandfather made the breakthrough which to the clockmaker is as the elixir to the alchemist. He created a clock which would not only function perpetually without winding, but from which time itself, that invisible yet palpable essence, could actually be gleaned — by contact, by proximity — like some form of magnetic charge. So, at least, it proved. The properties of this clock — or large pocket-watch, to be precise, for its benefits necessitated that it be easily carried — were not immediately observable. My great-grandfather had only an uncanny intuition. In his diary for that September day he writes cryptically: 'The new watch — I know, feel it in my blood — it is the *one*.' Thereafter, at weekly intervals, the same entry: 'The new watch — not yet wound.' The weekly interval lapses into a monthly one. Then, on September 3rd, 1810 — the exact anniversary of the watch's birth — the entry: 'The Watch — a whole year without winding', to which is added the mystical statement: 'We shall live for ever.'

But this is not all. I write now in the 1970s. In 1809 my great-grandfather was forty-two. Simple arithmetic will indicate that we are dealing here with extraordinary longevity. My great-grandfather died in 1900 — a man of one hundred and thirty-three, by this time an established and industrious clockmaker in one of the immigrant quarters of London. He was then, as a faded daguerrotype testifies, a man certainly old in appearance but not decrepit (you would have

judged him perhaps a hale seventy), still on his feet and still busy at his trade; and he died not from senility but from being struck by an ill-managed horse-drawn omnibus while attempting one July day to cross Ludgate Hill. From this it will be seen that my great-grandfather's watch did not confer immortality. It gave to those who had access to it a perhaps indefinite store of years; it was proof against age and against all those processes by which we are able to say that a man's time runs out, but it was not proof against external accident. Witness the death of Juliusz, my great-grandfather's first-born, killed by a Russian musket-ball in 1807. And Josef, the second-born, who came to a violent end in the troubles which forced my great-grandfather to flee his country.

To come closer home. In 1900 my grandfather, Feliks (my great-grandfather's third son) was a mere stripling of ninety-two. Born in 1808, and therefore receiving almost immediate benefit from my great-grandfather's watch, he was even sounder in limb, relatively speaking, than his father. I can vouch for this because (though, in 1900, I was yet to be conceived) I am now speaking of a man whom I have known intimately for the greater part of my own life and who, indeed, reared me almost from birth.

In every respect my grandfather was the disciple and image of my great-grandfather. He worked long and hard at the workshop in East London where he and Stanislaw, though blessed among mortals, still laboured at the daily business of our family. As he grew older — and still older — he acquired the solemn, vigilant and somewhat miserly looks of my great-grandfather. In 1900 he was the only remaining son and heir — for Stanislaw, by wondrous self-discipline, considering his length of years, had refrained from begetting further children, having foreseen the jealousies and divisions that the watch might arouse in a large family.

Feliks thus became the guardian of the watch which had now ticked away unwound for little short of a century. Its power was undiminished. Feliks lived on to the age of one hundred and sixty-one. He met his death, in brazen and spectacular fashion, but a few years ago, from a bolt of lightning, whilst walking in a violent storm in the Sussex downs. I myself can bear witness to his vigour, both of body and mind, at that more-than-ripe old age. For I myself watched him tramp off defiantly on that August night. I myself pleaded with him to heed the fury of the weather. And, after he failed to return, it was I who discovered his rain-soaked body, at the foot of a split tree, and pulled from his waistcoat pocket, on the

end of its gold chain, the Great Watch — still ticking.

But what of my father? Where was he while my grandfather took me in charge? That is another story — which we shall come to shortly. One of perversity and rebellion, and one, so my grandfather was never slow to remind me, which cast a shadow on our family honour and pride.

You will note that I have made no mention of the womenfolk of our family. Furthermore, I have said that Stanislaw took what must be considered some pains to limit his progeny. Increase in years, you might suppose, would lead to increase in issue. But this was not so — and Great-grandfather's feat was, perhaps, not so formidable. Consider the position of a man who has the prospect before him of extraordinary length of years and who looks back at his own past as other men look at history books. The limits of his being, his 'place in time', as the phrase goes, the fact of his perishability begin to fade and he begins not to interest himself in those means by which other men seek to prolong their existence. And of these, what is more universal than the begetting of children, the passing on of one's own blood?

Because they were little moved by the breeding instinct my great-grandfather and my grandfather were little moved by women. The wives they had — both of them got through three — followed very much the oriental pattern where women are little more than the property of their husbands. Chosen neither for their beauty nor fecundity but more for blind docility, they were kept apart from the masculine mysteries of clock-making and were only acquainted with the Great Watch on a sort of concessionary basis. If the only one of them I knew myself — my grandfather's last wife Eleanor — is anything to go by, they were slavish, silent, timid creatures, living in a kind of bemused remoteness from their husbands (who, after all, might be more than twice their age).

I remember my grandfather once expatiating on the reasons for this subjection and exclusion of women. 'Women, you see,' he warned, 'have no sense of time, they do not appreciate the urgency of things — that is what puts them in their place' — an explanation which I found unpersuasive then, perhaps because I was a young man and not uninterested in young women. But the years have confirmed the — painful — truth of my grandfather's judgement. Show me a woman who has the same urgency as a man. Show me

a woman who cares as much about the impending deadline, the ticking seconds, the vanishing hours. Ah yes, you will say, this is masculine humbug. Ah yes, I betray all the prejudice and contempt which ruined my brief marriage — which has ruined my life. But look at the matter on a broader plane. In the natural order of things it is women who are the longer lived. Why is this? Is it not precisely because they lack urgency — that urgency which preoccupies men, which drives them to unnatural subterfuges and desperate acts, which exhausts them and ushers them to an early death?

But urgency — despite his words — was not something that showed much in my grandfather's face. Understandably. For endowed with a theoretically infinite stock of time, what cause did he have for urgency? I have spoken of my elders' miserly and watchful looks. But this miserliness was not the miserliness of restless and rapacious greed; it was the contented, vacant miserliness of the miser who sits happily on a vast hoard of money which he has no intention of spending. And the watchfulness was not a sentry-like alertness; it was more the smug superciliousness of a man who knows he occupies a unique vantage point. In fact it is true to say, the longer my forefathers lived, the less animated they became. The more they immersed themselves in their obsession with time, the more they sank in their actions into mechanical and unvarying routine, tick-tocking their lives out like the miraculous instrument that enabled them to do so.

They did not want excitement, these Methuselahs, they dreamt no dreams. Nothing characterises more my life with my grandfather than the memory of countless monotonous evenings in the house he had at Highgate — evenings in which my guardian (that man who was born before Waterloo) would sit after dinner, intent, so it would seem, on nothing other than the process of his own digestion, while my grandmother would batten herself down in some inoffensive wifely task — darning socks, sowing buttons — and the silence, the heavy, aching silence (how the memory of certain silences can weigh upon you), would be punctuated only — by the tick of clocks.

Once I dared to break this silence, to challenge this leaden oppression of Time. I was a healthy, well-fed boy of thirteen. At such an age — who can deny it? — there is freshness. The moments slip by and you do not stop to count them. It was a summer evening and Highgate had, in those days, a verdant, even pastoral air. My grandfather was expounding (picture a boy of thirteen, a man of a hundred and twenty) upon his only subject when I interrupted

him to ask: 'But isn't it best when we forget time?'

I am sure that with these ingenuous words there rose in me — only to hold brief sway — the spirit of my rebellious, and dead father. I was not aware of the depths of my heresy. My grandfather's face took on the look of those fathers who are in the habit of removing their belts and applying them to their sons' hides. He did not remove his belt. Instead, I received the lashings of a terrible diatribe upon the folly of a world — of which my words were a very motto — which dared to believe that Time could take care of itself; followed by an invocation of the toils of my ancestors; followed, inevitably, by a calling down upon my head of the sins of my father. As I cringed before all this I acknowledged the indissoluble, if irrational link between age and authority. Youth must bow to age. This was the god-like fury of one hundred and twenty years beating down on me and I had no choice but to prostrate myself. And yet, simultaneously — as the fugitive summer twilight still flickered from the garden — I pondered on the awesome loneliness of being my grandfather's age — the loneliness (can you conceive it?) of having no contemporaries. And I took stock of the fact that seldom, if ever, had I seen my grandfather — this man of guarded and scrupulous mien — roused by such passion. Only once, indeed, did I see him so roused again — that day of his death, when, despite my efforts to dissuade him, he strode out into the gathering storm.

The sins of my father? What was my father's sin but to seek some other means of outwitting Time than that held out to him? The means of adventure, of hazard and daring, the means of a short life but a full, a memorable one. Was he really impelled by motives so different from those of his own father and his father's father?

Perhaps every third generation is a misfit. Born in 1895, my father would have become the third beneficiary of the Great Watch. From the earliest age, like every true Krepski male-child, he was reared on the staple diet of clocks and chronometry. But, even as a boy, he showed distinct and sometimes hysterical signs of not wishing to assume the family mantle. Grandfather Feliks has told me that he sometimes feared that little Stefan actually plotted to steal the Watch (which he ought to have regarded as the Gift of Gifts) in order to smash it or hide it or simply hurl it away somewhere. My grandfather consequently kept it always on his person and even wore it about his neck, on a locked chain at night

— which cannot have aided his sleep.

These were times of great anguish. Stefan was growing up into one of those psychopathic children who wish to wreak merciless destruction on all that their fathers hold dearest. His revolt, unprecedented in the family annals, may seem inexplicable. But I think I understand it. When Feliks was born his own father Stanislaw was forty: an unexceptional state of affairs. When Stefan grew out of mindless infancy, his father was approaching his first hundred. Who can say how a ten year old reacts to a centenarian father?

And what was Stefan's final solution to paternal oppression? It was a well-tryed one, even a hackneyed one, but one never attempted before in our family from land-locked Lublin. At the age of fifteen, in 1910, he ran away to sea, to the beckoning embraces of risk, fortune, fame — or oblivion. It was thought that no more would be seen of him. But this intrepid father of mine, not content with his runaway defiance or with braving the rough world he had pitched himself into, returned, after three years, for the pleasure of staring fixedly into my grandfather's face. He was then a youth of eighteen. But three years' voyaging — to Shanghai, Yokohama, Valparaiso ... — had toughened his skin and packed into his young frame more resourcefulness than my hundred year old grandfather had ever known, bent over his cogs and pendula.

My grandfather realised that he faced a man. That weather-beaten stare was a match for his hundred nominal years. The result of this sailor's return was a reconciliation, a rare balance between father and son — enhanced rather than marred by the fact that only a month or so afterwards Stefan took up with a woman of dubious character — the widow of a music-hall manager (perhaps it is significant that she was twelve years *older* than my father) — got her with child and married her. Thus I arrived on the scene.

My grandfather showed remarkable forbearance. He even stooped for a while to taste the transitory delights of variety artists and buxom singers. It seemed that he would not object — whether it was fitting or not — to Stefan and his lineage partaking of the Watch. It was even possible that Stefan — the only Krepski not to have done so in the way that fish take to swimming and birds to flight — might come round at last to the trade of clock-making.

But all this was not to be. In 1914 — the year of my birth — Stefan once more took to the sea, this time in the service of his country (for he was the first Krepski to be born on British soil). Once more there were heated confrontations, but my grandfather

could not prevail. Perhaps he knew that even without the pretext of war Stefan would have sooner or later felt stirred again by the life of daring and adventure. Feliks, at last, swallowing his anger and disappointment before the parting warrior, held out the prospect of the Watch as a father to a son, even if he could not hold it out as a master clock-maker to a faithful apprentice. Perhaps Stefan might indeed have returned in 1918, a salty hero, ready to settle down and receive its benison. Perhaps he too might have lived to a ripe one hundred, and another hundred more — were it not for the German shell which sent him and the rest of his gallant ship's crew to the bottom at the battle of Jutland.

So it was that I, who knew so intimately my grandfather whose own memories stretched back to Napoleonic times, and would doubtless have known — were it not for that fool of an omnibus driver — my great-grandfather, born while America was still a British colony, have no memories of my father at all. For when the great guns were booming at Jutland and my father's ship was raising its churning propellers to the sky, I was asleep in my cot in Bethnal Green, watched over by my equally unwitting mother. She was to die too, but six months later, of a mixture of grief and influenza. And I passed, at the age of two, into my grandfather's hands, and so into the ghostly hands of my venerable ancestors. From merest infancy I was destined to be a clockmaker, one of the solemn priesthood of Time, and whenever I erred in my noviceship, as on that beguiling evening in Highgate, to have set before me the warning example of my father — dead (though his name lives in glory — you will see it on the memorial at Chatham, the only Krepski amongst all those Jones and Wilsons) at the laughable age of twenty-one.

But this is not a story about my father, nor even about clock-making. All these lengthy preliminaries are only a way of explaining how on a certain day, a week ago, in a room on the second floor of a delapidated but (as shall be seen) illustrious Victorian building, I, Adam Krepski, sat, pressing in my hand till the sweat oozed from my palm, the Watch made by my great-grandfather, which for over one hundred and seventy years had neither stopped nor ever been wound. The day, as it happens, was my wedding anniversary. A cause for remembrance; but not for celebration. It is nearly thirty years since my wife left me.

And what was making me clutch so tightly that precious mechanism?

It was the cries. The cries coming up the dismal, echoing staircase; the cries from the room on the landing below, which for several weeks I had heard at sporadic intervals, but which now had reached a new, intense note and came with ever-increasing frequency. The cries of a woman, feline, inarticulate — at least to my ears, for I knew them to be the cries of an Asian woman — an Indian, a Pakistani — expressive first of outrage and grief (they had been mixed in those first days with the shouts of a man), but now of pain, of terror, of — it was this that tightened my grip so fervently on that Watch — of unmistakable *urgency*.

My wedding anniversary. Now I consider it, time has played more than one trick on me . . .

And what was I doing in that gloomy and half-derelict building, I, a Krepski clockmaker? That is a long and ravelled tale — one which begins perhaps on that fateful day in July, 1957, when I married.

My grandfather (who in that same year reached one hundred and fifty) was against it from the outset. The eve of my wedding was another of those humbling moments in my life when he invoked the folly of my father. Not that Deborah had any of the questionable credentials of the widow of a music-hall manager. She was a thirty-five year old primary school teacher, and I, after all, was forty-three. But — now my grandfather was midway through his second century — the misogynist bent of our family had reached in him a heightened, indiscriminate pitch. On the death of his third wife, in 1948, he had ceased to play the hypocrite and got himself a housekeeper, not a fourth wife. The disadvantage of this decision, so he sometimes complained to me, was that housekeepers had to be paid. His position towards womankind was entrenched. He saw my marriage-to-be as a hopeless backsliding into the mire of vain biological yearnings and the fraudulent permanence of procreation.

He was wrong. I did not marry to beget children (that fact was to be my undoing) nor to sell my soul to Time. I married simply to have another human being to talk to other than my grandfather.

Do not mistake me. I did not wish to abandon him. I had no intention of giving up my place beside him in the Krepski workshop or of forfeiting my share in the Watch. But consider the weight of his hundred and fifty years on my forty-odd. Consider that since

the age of three, not having known my father and, barely, my mother, I had been brought up by this prodigy who even at my birth was over a hundred. Might I not feel, in watered-down form, the oppressions and frustrations of my father? At twenty-five I had already grown tired of my grandfather's somehow hollow accounts of the Polish uprisings of 1830, of exiled life in Paris, of the London of the 1850s and '60s. I had begun to perceive that mixed with his blatant misogyny was a more general, brooding misanthropy — a contempt for the common run of men who lived out their meagre three score and ten. His eyes (one of which was permanently out of true from the constant use of a clockmaker's eye-piece) had developed a dull, sanctimonious stare. About his person there hung, like some sick-room smell infesting his clothes, an air of stagnancy, ill-humour, isolation, and even, to judge from his frayed jackets and the disrepair of his Highgate home — relative penury.

For what had become of 'Krepski and Krepski, Clock and Watchmakers of Repute', in the course of my lifetime? It was no longer the thriving East End workshop, employing six skilled craftsmen and three apprentices, it had been at the turn of the century. Economic changes had dealt it blows. The mass production of wrist-watches which were now two-a-penny and cheap electrical (electrical!) clocks had squeezed out the small business. On top of this was my grandfather's ever-increasing suspiciousness of nature. For, even if lack of money had not forced him to do so, he would have gradually dismissed his faithful workmen for fear they might discover the secret of the Watch and betray it to the world. That watch could prolong human life but not the life of commercial enterprise. By the 1950s Krepski and Krepski was no more than one of those grimy, tiny, Dickensian-looking shops one can still see on the fringes of the City, sign-boarded 'Watch and Clock Repairers' but looking more like a run-down pawnbroker's — to which aged customers would, very occasionally, bring the odd ancient mechanism for a 'seeing to'.

Grandfather was a hundred and fifty. He looked like a sour-minded but able-bodied man of half that age. Had he retired at the customary time (that is, some time during the 1860s or '70s) he would have known the satisfaction of passing on a business at the peak of its success and of enjoying a comfortable 'old age'. In the 1950s, still a fit man, he had no choice but to continue at the grinding task of scraping a living. Even had he retired and I had managed to support him, he would have returned, surely enough,

to the shop in Goswell Road, like a dog to its kennel.

Imagine the companionship of this man — in our poky, draughty place of work which vibrated ceaselessly to the rumblings of the City traffic outside; in the Highgate house with its flaking paintwork, damp walls and cracked crockery, and only the growlings of Mrs Murdoch, the housekeeper, to break the monotony. Was I to be blamed for flying with relief from this entombment to the arms of an impulsive, bright-minded, plumply attractive schoolteacher who — at thirty-five — was actually perturbed by the way the years were passing her by?

Ah, but in that last fact lay the seeds of marital catastrophe. Grandfather was right. A true Krepski, a true guardian of the Watch, should marry, if he is to marry at all, a plain, stupid and barren wife. Deborah was none of these things: she was that volatile phenomenon, a woman at what for women is a dangerous age, suddenly blessed with the prospect of womanhood fulfilled. Shall I describe our union as merely connubial? Shall I offer the picture of myself as the sober, steady, semi-paternal figure (I was eight years her elder) taking under my sheltering wing this slightly delicate, slightly frightened creature? No. Those first months were a whirlwind, a vortex into which I was sucked, gently at first and then with accelerating and uninhibited voracity. The walls of our first floor flat shook to the onslaughts of female passion; they echoed to Deborah's screams (for at the height of ecstasy Deborah would scream, at an ear-splitting pitch). And I, an, at first, unwitting and passive instrument to all this, a clay figure into which life was rapidly pummeled and breathed, suddenly woke to the fact that for thirty years my life had been measured by clocks; that for people who are not Krepskis, Time is not a servant but an old and pitiless adversary. They have only so long on this earth and they want only to live, to have lived. And when the opportunity comes it is seized with predatory fury.

Deborah, how easy the choice might have been if I had not been a Krepski. Sometimes, in those early days, I would wake up, nestled by my wife's ever-willing flesh and those years in Goswell Road would seem eclipsed: I was once more a boy — as on that audacious summer evening in Highgate — seduced by the world's caress. But then, in an instant, I would remember my grandfather, waiting already at his work bench, the Great Watch ticking in his pocket,

the clock-making, time-enslaving blood that flowed in his and my veins.

How easy the choice if passion were boundless and endless. But it is not, that is the rub; it must be preserved before it perishes and put in some permanent form. All men must make their pact with history. The spring-tide of marriage ebbs, we are told, takes on slower, saner, more effectual rhythms; the white-heat cools, diffuses, but is not lost. All this is natural, and has its natural and rightful object. But it was here that Deborah and I came to the dividing of the ways. I watched my wife through the rusting iron railings of the playground of the primary school where sometimes I met her at lunch-time. There was a delicate, wholesome bloom on her cheeks. Who could have guessed where that bloom came from? Who could have imagined what wild abandon could seize this eminently respectable figure behind closed doors and drawn curtains?

Yet that abandon was no longer indulged; it was withheld, denied (I had come to relish it) and would only be offered freely again in exchange for a more lasting gift. And who could mistake what that gift must be, watching her in the playground, her teacher's whistle round her neck, in the midst of those squealing infants, fully aware that my eyes were on her; patting on the head, as though to make the point unmistakable, now a pugnacious boy with grazed knees, now a Jamaican girl with pigtailed?

Had I told her, in all this time, about the Great Watch? Had I told her that I might outlive her by perhaps a century and that our life together — all in all to her — might become (so, alas, it has) a mere oasis in the sands of memory? Had I told her that my grandfather, whom she thought a doughty man of seventy-five, was really twice that age? And had I told her that in us Krepskis the spirit of fatherhood is dead? We do not need children to carry our image into the future, to provide us with that over-used bulwark against extinction.

No. I had told her none of these things. I held my tongue in the vain — the wishful? — belief that I might pass in her eyes for an ordinary mortal. If I told her, I assured myself, would she not think I was mad? And, then again, why should I not (was it so great a thing?) flout the scruples which were part of my heritage and give a child to this woman with whom, for a brief period at least, I had explored the timeless realm of passion?

Our marriage entered its fourth year. She approached the ominous age of forty. I was forty-seven, a point at which other men might

recognise the signs of age but at which I felt only the protective armour of the Watch tighten around me, the immunity of Krep-skihood squeeze me like an iron maiden. Dear Father Stefan, I prayed in hope. But no answering voice came from the cold depths of the Skaggerak or the Heligoland Bight. Instead I imagined a ghostly sigh from far off Poland — and an angry murmuring, perhaps, closer to hand, as Great-grandfather Stanislaw turned in his Highgate grave.

And I looked each day into the tacitly retributive eyes of my grandfather.

Deborah and I waged war. We bickered, we quarrelled, we made threats. And then at last, abandoning all subterfuge, I told her.

She did not think I was mad. Something in my voice, my manner told her that this was not madness. If it had been madness, perhaps, it would have been easier to endure. Her face turned white. In one fell stroke her universe was upturned. Her stock of love, her hungry flesh, her empty womb were mocked and belittled. She looked at me as if I might have been a monster with two heads or a fish's tail. The next day she fled — 'left me' is too mild a term — and, rather than co-exist another hour with my indefinite lease of life, returned to her mother, who — poor soul — was ailing, in need of nursing, and shortly to die.

Tick-tock, tick-tock. The invalid clocks clanked and wheezed on the shelves in Goswell Road. Grandfather showed tact. He did not rub salt in the wound. Our reunion even had, too, its brief honeymoon. The night of Deborah's departure I sat up with him in the house at Highgate and he recalled, not with the usual dry deliberateness but with tender spontaneity, the lost Poland of his youth. Yet this very tenderness was an ill omen. Men of fantastic age are not given to nostalgia. It is the brevity of life, the rapid passage of finite years, that gives rise to sentiment and regret. During my interlude with Deborah a change had crept over my grandfather. The air of stagnancy, the fixation in the eyes were still there but what was new was that he himself seemed aware of these things as he had not before. Sorrow shadowed his face, and weariness, weariness.

The shop was on its last legs. Anyone could see there was no future in it; and yet for Grandfather, for me, there was, always, future. We potted away, in the musty workroom, eking out what scant business came our way. The Great Watch, that symbol of

Time conquered ticking remorselessly in Grandfather's waistcoat, had become, we knew, our master. Sometimes I dreamt wildly of destroying it, of taking a hammer to its invulnerable mechanism. But how could I have committed an act so sacrilegious, and one which, for all I knew, might have reduced my grandfather, in an instant, to dust?

We worked on. I remember the hollow mood — neither relief nor reluctance but some empty reflex between the two — with which we shut the shop each night at six and made our journey home. How we would sit, like two creatures sealed in a bubble, as our number 43 trundled up the Holloway Road, watching the fretfulness of the evening rush (how frenzied the activity of others when one's own pace is slow and interminable) with a cold reptilian stare.

Ah, happy restless world, with oblivion waiting to solve its cares.

Ah, lost Deborah, placing gladioli on the grave of her mother.

The sons, and grandsons, of the ordinary world do their duty by their sires. They look after them in their twilight years. But what if twilight never falls?

By the summer of my grandfather's hundred and sixty-second year I could endure no more. With the last dregs of my feeble savings I rented a cottage in the Sussex downs. My aim was to do what necessity urged: to sell up the shop; to find myself a job with a steady income by which I might support Grandfather and myself. Admittedly, I was now fifty-five, but my knowledge of clocks might find me a place with an antique dealer's or as sub-curator in some obscure museum of horology. In order to attempt all this, Grandfather had first to be lured to a safe distance.

This is not to say that the cottage was merely an — expensive — expedient. One part of me sincerely wished my grandfather to stop peering into the dusty orbs of clocks and to peer out again at the World — even the tame, parochial world of Sussex. Ever lurking in my mind was the notion that age ripens, mellows and brings its own, placid contentments. Why had not his unique length of years afforded my grandfather more opportunity to enjoy, to savour, to contemplate the world? Why should he not enter now an era of meditative tranquillity, of god-like congruence with Nature? Youth should bow to age not only in duty but in veneration. Perhaps I had always been ashamed — perhaps it was a source of secret despair for my own future — that my grandfather's years had only produced in him the crabbed, cantankerous creature I knew. Perhaps I hoped

that extraordinary age might have instilled in him extraordinary sagacity. Perhaps I saw him — wild, impossible vision — turning in his country hermitage into some hallowed figure, a Sussex shaman, a Wise Man of the Downs, an oracle to whom the young and foolish world might flock for succour.

Or perhaps my motive was simpler than this. Perhaps it was no more than that of those plausible, burdened sons and daughters who, with well-meaning looks and at no small cost, place their parents in Homes, in order to have them out of sight and mind — in order, that is, to have them safely murdered.

My clinching argument was that, though all that would be left of Krepiski and Krepiski would be the Great Watch, yet that all would be all-in-all. And as a preliminary concession I agreed to spend a first experimental weekend with him at the cottage.

We travelled down on a Friday afternoon. It was one of those close, sullen high-summer days which make the fresh crawl and seem to bring out from nowhere swarms of flying insects. Grandfather sat in his seat in the railway carriage and hid his face behind a newspaper. This, like the weather, was a bad sign. Normally, he regarded papers with disdain. What did the news of 1977 mean to a man born in 1808? Almost by definition, papers were tokens of man's subjection to time; their business was ephemerality. Yet recently, so I had noticed, he had begun to buy them and to read them almost with avidity; and what his eyes went to first were reports of accidents and disasters, sudden violent deaths . . .

Now and then, as we passed through the Surrey suburbs, he came out from behind his screen. His face was not the face of a man travelling towards rejuvenating horizons. It was the petrified face of a man whom no novelty can touch.

The Sussex downs, an hour from London, still retain their quiet nooks and folds. Our cottage — one of a pair let by some palm-rubbing local speculator as weekend retreats — stood at one end of the village and at the foot of one of those characteristic, peculiarly female eminences of the Downs, referred to in the Ordnance Survey map as a Beacon. In spite of the sticky heat, I proposed this as the object of a walk the day after our arrival. The place was a noted viewpoint. Let us look down, I thought, us immortals, at the world.

Grandfather was less enthusiastic. His reluctance had nothing to do with his strength of limb. The climb was steep, but Grandfather, despite his years, was as fit as a man of forty. His unwillingness lay

in a scarcely concealed desire to sabotage and deride this enterprise of mine. He had spent the first hours after our arrival shambling round the cottage, not bothering to unpack his things, inspecting the oak timbers, the 'traditional fireplace' and the 'charming cottage garden' with an air of acid distaste, and finally settling heavily into a chair in just the same hunched manner in which he settled into his habitual chair in Highgate or his work stool at the shop. Long life ought to elicit a capacity for change. But it is the opposite (I know it well). Longevity encourages intransigence, conservatism. It teaches you to revert to type.

The sultry weather had not freshened. Half way up the slope of the beacon we gave up our ascent, both of us in a muck-sweat. Even at this relative height no breezes challenged the leaden atmosphere, and the famous view, northwards to the Weald of Kent, was lost in grey curtains of haze and the shadows of black, greasy clouds. We sat on the tussocked grass, recovering our breath, Grandfather a little to one side and below me, mute as boulders. The silence hanging between us was like an epitaph upon my futile hopes: Give up this doomed exercise.

And yet, not silence. That is, not *our* silence — but the silence in which we sat. A silence which, as our gasps for breath subsided, became gradually palpable, audible, insistent. We sat, listening, on the warm grass, ears pricked like alert rabbits. We forgot our abortive climb. When had we last heard such silence, used as we were to the throbbing traffic of the Goswell Road? And what a full, what a tumultuous silence. Under the humid pressure of the atmosphere the earth was opening up its pores and the silence was a compound of its numberless exhalations. The downs themselves — those great feminine curves of flesh — were tingling, oozing. And what were all the components of this massive silence — the furious hatching of insects, the sighing of the grass, the trill of larks, the far-off bleat of sheep — but the issue of that swelling pregnancy? What, in turn, was that pregnancy, pressing, even as we sat, into our puny backsides, but the pregnancy of Time?

Old, they say, as the hills. Grandfather sat motionless, his face turned away from me. For a moment, I imagined the tough, chalk-scented grass spreading over him, rising round him to make of him no more than a turf cairn. On the Ordnance Survey maps were the acne-marks of neolithic barrows and iron age earthworks.

Silence. And the only noise, the only man-made obtrusion into that overpowering silence was the tick of Great-grandfather's Watch.



We began to descend. Grandfather's face wore a look of gloom; of humility, of pride, of remorse, contrition — despair.

The night was quick in coming, hastened by the louring clouds. And it brought the appropriate conditions — a drop in temperature, a clash of air currents — to release the pent up explosion. As the electricity in the atmosphere accumulated so Grandfather grew increasingly restless. He began to pace about the cottage, face twitching, darting black scowls in my direction. Twice, he got out the Watch, looked at it as if on the verge of some dreadful decision, then with an agonised expression returned it to his pocket. I was afraid of him. Thunder clattered and lightning flashed in the distance. And then, as if an invisible giant had taken a vast stride, a wind tore at the elm trees in the lane, half a dozen unfamiliar doors and windows banged in the cottage, and the bolts from heaven seemed suddenly aimed at a point over our heads. Grandfather's agitation intensified accordingly. His lips worked at themselves. I expected them to froth. Another whirlwind outside. I went upstairs to fasten one of the banging windows. When I returned he was standing by the front door, buttoning his raincoat.

'Don't try to stop me!'

But I could not have stopped him if I had dared. His mania cast an uncrossable barrier around him. I watched him pass out into the frenzied air. Barely half a minute after his exit the skies opened and rain lashed down.

I was not so obtuse as to imagine that my grandfather had gone for a mere stroll. But something kept me from pursuing him. I sat in a rocking chair by the 'traditional fireplace', waiting and (discern my motive if you will) even smiling, fixedly, while the thunder volleyed outside. Something about the drama of the moment, something about this invasion of the elements into our lives I could not help but find (like the man who grins idiotically at his executioner) gratifying.

And then I acted. The Beacon: that was the best place for storm watching. For defying — or inviting — the wrath of the skies. I reached for my own waterproof and walking shoes and strode out into the tumult.

During a thunder-storm, in Thuringia, so the story goes, Martin Luther broke down, fell to his knees, begged the Almighty for forgiveness and swore to become a monk. I am not a religious man — had I not been brought up to regard a certain timepiece as the only object of worship? — but that night I feared for my soul; that

night I believe a God was at work, directing my steps to the scene of divine revenge. The thunder beat its drums. By the intermittent flashes of lightning I found my way to the slopes of the beacon; but, once there, it seemed I did not need a guide to point my course — I did not need to reach the top and stand there like some demented weathercock. The downs are bald, bold formations and in the magnesium-glare of lightning any features could be picked out. Clinging to the incline was a solitary clump of trees, of the kind which, on the downs, are said to have a druidical significance. I needed to go no further. One of the trees had been split and felled by a scimitar of lightning. Grandfather lay lifeless beside its twisted wreckage, an anguished grimace frozen on his face. And in his waistcoat pocket, beneath his sodden coat and jacket, the Great Watch, its tiny, perfect, mechanical brain ignorant of storms, of drama, of human catastrophe, still ticked indifferently.

Help me, powers that be! Help me, Father Time! I stood in the crematorium, the last of the Krepksis, the Great Watch ticking in my pocket. Flames completed on Grandfather the work of the lightning, and reduced, in a matter of seconds, his one hundred and sixty year old body to cinders. That day, a day so different — a tranquil, golden August day — from that night of death, I could have walked away and become a new man. I could have traced my steps — only a short distance — to the school playground where Deborah still stood among her frolicking brood, and asked to be reconciled. Her mother; my grandfather. The chastening bonds of bereavement.

I could have flung the Watch away. Indeed, I considered having it incinerated with Grandfather's corpse — but the rules of crematoria are strict on such matters. And did I not, that same afternoon, having attended the perfunctory reading of a barren will at a solicitor's in Chancery Lane, walk on the Thames Embankment, under the plane trees, holding the Watch in my sweating hand and daring myself to throw it? Twice I drew back my arm and twice let it fall. From the glinting river the waterborne voice of my father said, Why not? Why not? But I thought of Grandfather's ashes, still warm and active in their urn (surely when one lives the best part of two centuries one does not die so quickly?). I thought of Great-grandfather Stanislaw, and of his forebears, whose names I knew like a litany — Stanislaw senior, Kasimierz, Ignacy, Tadeusz. In the curving reaches of the Thames I saw what I had never seen:

the baroque spires of Lublin; the outstretched plains of Poland.

It is true what the psychologists say: our ancestors are our first and only gods. It is from them we get our guilt, our duty, our sin — our destiny. A few claps of thunder had awed me, a few celestial firecrackers had given me a passing scare. I gripped the Watch. I did not go back to the infants' school that afternoon, nor even, at first, to the house in Highgate. I went — all the way on foot, like a devout pilgrim — to the street in Whitechapel where my great-grandfather, a flourishing clock-maker in his hundred and twelfth year had set up home in the 1870s. In the 1870s there were fine houses as well as slums in Whitechapel. The street was still there. And so was the old home — its crumbling stucco, its cracked and boarded-up windows, its litter-strewn front steps a mockery of the former building which had once boasted two maids and a cook. I stared at it. By some prompting of fate, by some inevitable reflex on my part, I knocked on the door. The face of an Asian woman; timid, soulful. Someone had told me there was a room to let in this house. Yes, it was true — on the second floor.

So I did not throw away the Watch: I found a shrine in which to place it. And I did not return — save to dispose of its meagre contents and arrange its sale — to the house in Highgate. I refashioned my world, on a hermit's terms, out of an ancestral room in Whitechapel. Time, as even the ignorant will tell you and every clock-face will demonstrate, is circular. The longer you live, the more you long to go back, to go back. I closed my eyes on that old charlatan, the future. And Deborah remained for ever in her playground, whistling at her children, like someone vainly whistling for a runaway dog which already lies dead at the side of a road.

Thus I came to be sitting, a week ago, in that same room in Whitechapel, clutching, as I had that day by the Thames, the Watch in my itching palm. And still they came, the cries, desolate and unappeasable, from the floor below.

What was the meaning of these cries? I knew (I who had renounced such things to live in perpetual marriage with the Watch) they were the cries that come from the interminglings of men and women, the cries of heart-break and vain desire. I knew they were the cries of that same Asian woman who had opened the door for me that day of Grandfather's cremation. A Mrs — or Miss? —

Matharu. The husband (lover?) had come and gone at varying times. A shift-worker of some sort. Sometimes I met him on the stairs. An exchange of nods; a word. But I did not seek more. I burrowed in my ancestral lair. And even when the shouting began — his ferocious, rapid, hers like some ruffled, clucking bird — I did not intervene. Thunder-storms pass. Clocks tick on. The shouts were followed by screams, blows, the noise of slamming doors — sobs. Still I sat tight. Then one day the door slammed with the unmistakable tone of finality (ah, Deborah); and the sobs that followed were not the sobs that still beg and plead, but solitary sobs, whimpering and dirge-like — the sobs of the lonely lingering out the empty hours.

Did I go down the stairs? Did I give a gentle knock to the door and ask softly, 'Can I help?' No. The world is full of snares.

Time heals. Soon these whimperings would cease. And so they did. Or, rather, faded into almost-silence — only to build up again into new crescendos of anguish.

I gripped my ticking talisman, as the sick and dying cling, in their hour of need, to pitiful trinkets. Do not imagine that these female cries merely assailed my peace and did not bring to me, as to their utterer, real suffering. I recognised that they emanated from a region ungoverned by time — and thus were as poisonous, as lethal to us Krepskis as fresh air to a fish.

We were alone in the building, this wailing woman and I. The house — the whole street — lay under the ultimatum of a compulsory purchase. The notices had been issued. Already the other rooms were vacated. And already, beyond my window, walls were tumbling, bulldozers were sending clouds of dust into the air. The house of Krepski must fall soon; as had fallen already the one-time houses of Jewish tailors, Dutch goldsmiths, Russian furriers — a whole neighbourhood of immigrant tradesmen, stepping off the ships at London docks and bringing with them the strands of their far-flung pasts. How could it be that all this history had been reduced, before my eyes, to a few heaps of flattened rubble and a few grey demarcations of corrugated fencing?

Another rending cry, like the tearing of flesh itself. I stood up: I clutched my forehead; sat down; stood up again. I descended the stairs. But I did not loosen my grip on the Watch.

She lay — beneath a tangled heap of bedclothes, on a mattress in the large, draughty room which I imagined had once been my great-grandfather's drawing-room, but which now served as

living-room, kitchen and bedroom combined — in the obvious grip not so much of grief as of illness. Clearly, she had been unable to answer my knock at the door, which was unlocked, and perhaps had been for weeks. Sweat beaded her face. Her eyes burned. And even as I stood over her she drew a constricted gasp of pain and her body shuddered beneath the heaped bedclothes which I suspected had been pulled rapidly about her as I entered.

Circumstances conspire. This woman, as I knew from the dozen words we had exchanged in little more than a year, spoke scarcely any English. She could not describe her plight; I could not inquire. No language was needed to tell me I should fetch a doctor, but as I bent over her, with the caution with which any Krepski bends over a woman, she suddenly gripped my arm, no less fiercely than my free hand gripped the Watch. When I signalled my intention, mouthing the word 'doctor' several times, she gripped it tightly still, and an extra dimension of torment seemed to enter her face. It struck me that had I been a younger man (I was sixty-three, but little did she know that in Krepski terms I was still callow) her grip on my arm might have been less ready. Even so, fear as much as importunacy knotted her face. More than one layer of shame seemed present in her eyes as she let out another uncontrollable moan and her body strained beneath the bedclothes.

'What's wrong? What's wrong?'

You will doubtless think me foolish and colossally ignorant for not recognising before this point the symptoms of child-birth. For such they were. I, a Krepski who held in my hand the power to live so long and whose forefathers had lived so long before him, did not recognise the beginnings of life, and did not know what a woman in labour is like. But, once the knowledge dawned, I understood not only the fact but its implications and the reasons for this woman's mingled terror and entreaty. The child was the child of a fugitive father. Daddy was far away, ignorant perhaps of this fruit of his dalliance, just as my father Stefan, far away on the North Sea, was ignorant of my mother stooping over my cot. Daddy, perhaps, was no Daddy by law; and who could say whether by *law* either Daddy or Mummy were rightful immigrants? That might explain the hand gripping me so tightly as I turned for professional help. Add to all this that I was an Englishman and I bent over this woman — whose mother had perhaps worn a veil in some village by the Ganges — as she suffered the most intimate female distress . . . You will see the position was vexed.

And I had no choice but to be the witness — the midwife — to this hopeless issue.

I understood that the moment was near. Her black-olive eyes fixed me from above the tangled sheets, in which, as if obeying some ancient instinct, she tried to hide her mouth. The point must soon come when she must abandon all modesty — and I all squeamishness — and I could see her weighing this terrible candour against the fact that I was her only help.

But as we stared at each other a strange thing happened. In the little half-oval of face which she showed me I seemed to see, as if her eyes were equipped with some extraordinary ultra-optical lens, the huge hinterlands of her native Asia and the endless nut-brown faces of her ancestors. At the same time, marshalled within myself, assembling from the distant margins of Poland, were the ranks of my Krepski sires. What a strange thing that our lives should collide, here where neither had its origins. How strange that they should collide at all. What a strange and extraordinary thing that I should be born a Krepski, she a Matharu. What an impossible concatenation of chances goes to the making of any birth.

I must have smiled at these thoughts — or at least lent to my face some expression which infected hers. For her look suddenly softened — her black irises melted — then immediately hardened again. She screwed her eyes shut, let out a scream, and with a gesture of submission — as she might have submitted to that brute of a husband — pulled back the bedclothes from the lower part of her body, drew up her legs, and, clutching at the bedhead with her hands, began to strain mightily.

Her eyes were shut; I think they remained shut throughout the whole ensuing procedure. But mine opened, wider and wider, at what perhaps no Krepski had seen, or at least *viewed* with such privileged and terrified intentness. The mother — for this is what she was now indubitably becoming — arched her spine, heaved her monstrous belly, seemed to offer her whole body to be cleaved from between the legs upwards, and those expanding eyes of mine saw a glistening, wet, purple-mottled object, like some wrinkled marble pebble, appear where the split began. This pebble grew — and grew — growing impossibly large for the narrow opening in which it seemed intent on jamming itself. For a whole minute, indeed, it stuck there, as if this were its final resting place, while the mother screamed. And then suddenly it ceased to be a pebble. It was a

lump of clenched, unformed flesh, suffused with blood, aware that its position was critical. The mother gasped; it became a head, a gnarled, battered, Punch-and-Judy head. The mother gasped again, this time with an audible relief and exultation; and it was no longer a head, but a whole *creature*, with arms and legs and little groping hands; and it was no longer caught in that awesome constriction but suddenly spilling out with slippery ease, like something poured from a pickle jar, a slithery brine accompanying it. But this was not all. As if it were not remarkable enough that so large a thing should emerge from so small a hole, there followed it, rapidly, an indescribable mass of multicoloured effluents, the texture and hue of liquid coral, gelatine, stewed blackberries . . .

From what a ragout is a human life concocted.

What was I doing throughout this spectacular performance? My eyes were popping, my knees were giving; I was clutching the Great Watch, fit to crush it, in my right hand. But now, with the little being writhing in slow motion on the gory sheets and the mother's moans of relief beginning to mingle with a new anguish, I knew that I had my own unavoidable part to play in this drama. Once, on Grandfather's television at Highgate, I had watched (disgusted but fascinated) a programme about child-delivery. I knew that much pertained to the fleshy tube which even now snaked and coiled between mother and baby. The mother understood it too; for with her last reserves of energy she was gesturing to a chest of drawers on the far side of the room. In one of the drawers I found a pair of kitchen scissors . . .

With the instant of birth begins the possibility of manslaughter. My untutored hands did what they could while my stomach fought down surging tides — not just of nausea but of strange, welling fear. Like the TV surgeon, I held up the slippery creature and, with an irresolute hand, slapped it. It grimaced feebly and made the sound — a sound of choking pain — which they say means life has taken hold. But it looked wretched and sick to me. I put it down on the mattress close to the mother's side, as if some maternal fluence could do the trick I could not. We looked at each other, she and I, with the imploring looks of actual lovers, actual cogenitors who have pooled their flesh in a single hope.

Deborah . . . with your playground whistle.

I had heard the expression 'life hangs in the balance'. I knew that it applied to tense moments in operating theatres and in condemned cells when a reprieve may still come, but I never knew

— used to life as an ambling affair that might span centuries — what it meant. And only now do I know what enormous concentrations of time, what huge counter-forces of piled-up years, decades, centuries, go into those moments when the balance might swing, one way or the other.

We looked at the pitiful child. Its blind face was creased; its fingers worked. Its breaths were clearly numbered. The mother began to blubber, adding yet more drops to her other, nameless outpourings; and I felt my ticking, clockmaker's heart swell inside me. A silent, involuntary prayer escaped me.

And suddenly they were there again. Stanislaw and Feliks and Stefan; winging towards me by some uncanny process, bringing with them the mysterious essence of the elements that had received them and decomposed them. Great-grandfather from his Highgate grave, Grandfather from his urn, Father (was he the first to arrive?) from the grey depths where the fishes had nibbled him and the currents long since corroded and dispersed him. Earth, fire, water. They flocked out of the bowels of Nature. And with them came Stanislaw senior, Kasimierz, Tadeusz; and all the others whose names I forget; and even the mythical Krepfs of Nuremburg and Prague.

My hand was on the magic, genie-summoning Watch. In that moment I knew that Time is not something that exists, like territory to be annexed, outside us. What are we all but the distillation of all time? What is each one of us but the sum of all the time before him?

The little baby chest was trembling feebly; the hands still groped; the wrinkled face was turning blue. I held out the Great Watch of Stanislaw. I let it swing gently on its gold chain over the miniscule fingers of this new-born child. They say the first instinct a baby has is to grasp. It touched the ticking masterpiece fashioned in Lublin in the days of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. A tiny forefinger and thumb clasped with the force of feathers the delicately chased gold casing and the thick, yellowed glass. A second — an eternity passed. And then — the almost motionless chest began to heave vigorously. The face knotted itself up to emit a harsh, stuttering wail, in the timbre of which there seemed the rudiments of a chuckle. The mother's tearful eyes brightened. At the same time I felt inside me a renewed flutter of fear. No, not of fear exactly: a draining away of something; a stripping away of some imposture, as if I had no right to be where I was.

The day of Grandfather's funeral had been such a day — hard, dazzling, spangled with early frost and gold leaves. We stood at the ceremony, Mother, Ralph and I, like a mock version of the trio — Grandfather, Mother and I — who had once stood at my father's memorial service. Mother did not cry. She had not cried at all, even in the days before the funeral when the policemen and the officials from the coroner's court came, writing down their statements, apologising for their intrusion and asking their questions.

They did not address their questions to me. Mother said: 'He's only ten, what can he know?' Though there were a thousand things I wanted to tell them — about how Mother banished Grandfather, about how suicide can be murder and how things don't end — which made me feel that I was somehow under suspicion. I took the jar of acid from my bedroom, went to the park and threw it in the pond.

And then after the funeral, after the policemen and officials had gone, Mother and Ralph began to clear out the house and to remove the things from the shed. They tidied the overgrown parts of the garden and clipped back the trees. Ralph wore an old sweater which was far too small for him and I recognised it as one of Father's. And Mother said: 'We're going to move to a new house soon — Ralph's buying it.'

I had nowhere to go. I went down to the park and stood by the pond. Dead willow leaves floated on it. Beneath its surface was a bottle of acid and the wreck of my launch. But though things change they aren't destroyed. It was there, by the pond, when dusk was gathering and it was almost time for the park gates to be locked, as I looked to the centre where my launch sank, then up again to the far side, that I saw him. He was standing in his black overcoat and his grey scarf. The air was very cold and little waves were running across the water. He was smiling, and I knew: the launch was still travelling over to him, unstoppable, unsinkable, along that invisible line. And his hands, his acid-marked hands, would reach out to receive it.

## LEARNING TO SWIM

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Mrs Singleton had three times thought of leaving her husband. The first time was before they were married, on a charter plane coming back from a holiday in Greece. They were students who had just graduated. They had rucksacks and faded jeans. In Greece they had stayed part of the time by a beach on an island. The island was dry and rocky with great grey and vermilion coloured rocks and when you lay on the beach it seemed that you too became a hot, basking rock. Behind the beach there were eucalyptus trees like dry, leafy bones, old men with mules and gold teeth, a fragrance of thyme, and a café with melon pips on the floor and a jukebox which played bouzouki music and songs by Cliff Richard. All this Mr Singleton failed to appreciate. He'd only liked the milk-warm, clear-blue sea, in which he'd stayed most of the time as if afraid of foreign soil. On the plane she'd thought: he hadn't enjoyed the holiday, hadn't liked Greece at all. All that sunshine. Then she'd thought she ought not to marry him.

Though she had, a year later.

The second time was about a year after Mr Singleton, who was a civil engineer, had begun his first big job. He became a junior partner in a firm with a growing reputation. She ought to have been pleased by this. It brought money and comfort; it enabled them to move to a house with a large garden, to live well, to think about raising a family. They spent weekends in country hotels. But Mr Singleton seemed untouched by this. He became withdrawn and incommunicative. He went to his work austere-faced. She thought: he likes his bridges and tunnels better than me.

The third time, which was really a phase; not a single moment, was when she began to calculate how often Mr Singleton made love

to her. When she started this it was about once every fortnight on average. Then it became every three weeks. The interval had been widening for some time. This was not a predicament Mrs Singleton viewed selfishly. Love-making had been a problem before, in their earliest days together, which, thanks to her patience and initiative, had been overcome. It was Mr Singleton's unhappiness, not her own, that she saw in their present plight. He was distrustful of happiness as some people fear heights or open spaces. She would reassure him, encourage him again. But the averages seemed to defy her personal effort: once every three weeks, once every month . . . She thought: things go back to as they were.

But then, by sheer chance, she became pregnant.

Now she lay on her back, eyes closed, on the coarse sand of the beach in Cornwall. It was hot and, if she opened her eyes, the sky was clear blue. This and the previous summer had been fine enough to make her husband's refusal to go abroad for holidays tolerable. If you kept your eyes closed it could be Greece or Italy or Ibiza. She wore a chocolate-brown bikini, sun-glasses, and her skin, which seldom suffered from sunburn, was already beginning to tan. She let her arms trail idly by her side, scooping up little handfuls of sand. If she turned her head to the right and looked towards the sea she could see Mr Singleton and their son Paul standing in the shallow water. Mr Singleton was teaching Paul to swim. 'Kick!' he was saying. From here, against the gentle waves, they looked like no more than two rippling silhouettes.

'Kick!' said Mr Singleton, 'Kick!' He was like a punisher, administering lashes.

She turned her head away to face upwards. If you shut your eyes you could imagine you were the only one on the beach; if you held them shut you could be part of the beach. Mrs Singleton imagined that in order to acquire a tan you had to let the sun make love to you.

She dug her heels in the sand and smiled involuntarily.

When she was a thin, flat-chested, studious girl in a grey school uniform Mrs Singleton had assuaged her fear and desperation about sex with fantasies which took away from men the brute physicality she expected of them. All her lovers would be artists. Poets would write poems to her, composers would dedicate their works to her. She would even pose, naked and immaculate, for painters, who having committed her true, her eternal form to canvas, would make love to her in an impalpable, ethereal way, under the power of

which her bodily and temporal self would melt away, perhaps forever. These fantasies (for she had never entirely renounced them) had crystallized for her in the image of a sculptor, who from a cold intractable piece of stone would fashion her very essence — which would be vibrant and full of sunlight, like the statues they had seen in Greece.

At university she had worked on the assumption that all men lusted uncontrollably and insatiably after women. She had not yet encountered a man who, whilst prone to the usual instincts, possessing moreover a magnificent body with which to fulfil them, yet had scruples about doing so, seemed ashamed of his own capacities. It did not matter that Mr Singleton was reading engineering, was scarcely artistic at all, or that his powerful physique was unlike the nebulous creatures of her dreams. She found she loved this solid man-flesh. Mrs Singleton had thought she was the shy, inexperienced, timid girl. Overnight she discovered that she wasn't this at all. He wore tough denim shirts, spoke and smiled very little and had a way of standing very straight and upright as if he didn't need any help from anyone. She had to educate him into moments of passion, of self-forgetfulness which made her glow with her own achievement. She was happy because she had not thought she was happy and she believed she could make someone else happy. At the university girls were starting to wear jeans, record-players played the Rolling Stones and in the hush of the Modern Languages Library she read Leopardi and Verlaine. She seemed to float with confidence in a swirling, buoyant element she had never suspected would be her own.

'Kick!' she heard again from the water.

Mr Singleton had twice thought of leaving his wife. Once was after a symphony concert they had gone to in London when they had not known each other very long and she still tried to get him to read books, to listen to music, to take an interest in art. She would buy concert or theatre tickets, and he had to seem pleased. At this concert a visiting orchestra was playing some titanic, large-scale work by a late nineteenth-century composer. A note in the programme said it represented the triumph of life over death. He had sat on his plush seat amidst the swirling barrage of sound. He had no idea what he had to do with it or the triumph of life over death. He had thought the same thought about the rapt girl on his left, the future Mrs Singleton, who now and then bobbed, swayed or rose in her seat as if the music physically lifted her. There were

at least seventy musicians on the platform. As the piece worked to its final crescendo the conductor, whose arms were flailing frantically so that his white shirt back appeared under his flying tails, looked so absurd Mr Singleton thought he would laugh. When the music stopped and was immediately supplanted by wild cheering and clapping he thought the world had gone mad. He had struck his own hands together so as to appear to be sharing the ecstasy. Then, as they filed out, he had almost wept because he felt like an insect. He even thought she had arranged the whole business so as to humiliate him.

He thought he would not marry her.

The second time was after they had been married some years. He was one of a team of engineers working on a suspension bridge over an estuary in Ireland. They took it in turns to stay on the site and to inspect the construction work personally. Once he had to go to the very top of one of the two piers of the bridge to examine work on the bearings and housing for the main overhead cables. A lift ran up between the twin towers of the pier amidst a network of scaffolding and power cables to where a working platform was positioned. The engineer, with the supervisor and the foreman, had only to stay on the platform from where all the main features of construction were visible. The men at work on the upper sections of the towers, specialists in their trade, earning up to two hundred pounds a week — who balanced on precarious cat-walks and walked along exposed reinforcing girders — often jibed at the engineers who never left the platform. He thought he would show them. He walked out on to one of the cat-walks on the outer face of the pier where they were fitting huge grip-bolts. This was quite safe if you held on to the rails but still took some nerve. He wore a check cheese-cloth shirt and his white safety helmet. It was a grey, humid August day. The cat-walk hung over greyness. The water of the estuary was the colour of dead fish. A dredger was chugging near the base of the pier. He thought, I could swim the estuary; but there is a bridge. Below him the yellow helmets of workers moved over the girders for the roadway like beetles. He took his hands from the rail. He wasn't at all afraid. He had been away from his wife all week. He thought: she knows nothing of this. If he were to step out now into the grey air he would be quite by himself, no harm would come to him . . .

Now Mr Singleton stood in the water, teaching his son to swim. They were doing the water-wings exercise. The boy wore a pair of

water-wings, red underneath, yellow on top, which ballooned up under his arms and chin. With this to support him, he would splutter and splash towards his father who stood facing him some feet away. After a while at this they would try the same procedure, his father moving a little nearer, but without the water-wings, and this the boy dreaded. 'Kick!' said Mr Singleton, 'Use your legs!' He watched his son draw painfully towards him. The boy had not yet grasped that the body naturally floated and that if you added to this certain mechanical effects, you swam. He thought that in order to swim you had to make as much frantic movement as possible. As he struggled towards Mr Singleton his head, which was too high out of the water, jerked messily from side to side, and his eyes which were half closed swivelled in every direction but straight ahead. 'Towards me!' shouted Mr Singleton. He held out his arms in front of him for Paul to grasp. As his son was on the point of clutching them he would step back a little, pulling his hands away, in the hope that the last desperate lunge to reach his father might really teach the boy the art of propelling himself in water. But he sometimes wondered if this were his only motive.

'Good boy. Now again.'

At school Mr Singleton had been an excellent swimmer. He had won various school titles, broken numerous records and competed successfully in ASA championships. There was a period between the age of about thirteen and seventeen which he remembered as the happiest in his life. It wasn't the medals and trophies that made him glad, but the knowledge that he didn't have to bother about anything else. Swimming vindicated him. He would get up every morning at six and train for two hours in the baths, and again before lunch; and when he fell asleep, exhausted, in French and English periods in the afternoon, he didn't have to bother about the indignation of the masters — lank, ill-conditioned creatures — for he had his excuse. He didn't have to bother about the physics teacher who complained to the headmaster that he would never get the exam results he needed if he didn't cut down his swimming, for the headmaster (who was an advocate of sport) came to his aid and told the physics teacher not to interfere with a boy who was a credit to the school. Nor did he have to bother about a host of other things which were supposed to be going on inside him, which made the question of what to do in the evening, at week-ends, fraught and tantalizing, which drove other boys to moodiness and recklessness. For once in the cool water of the baths, his arms reaching, his eyes

fixed on the blue marker line on the bottom, his ears full so that he could hear nothing around him, he would feel quite by himself, quite sufficient. At the end of races, when for one brief instant he clung panting alone like a survivor to the finishing rail which his rivals had yet to touch, he felt an infinite peace. He went to bed early, slept soundly, kept to his training regimen; and he enjoyed this Spartan purity which disdained pleasure and disorder. Some of his school mates mocked him — for not going to dances on Saturdays or to pubs, under age, or the Expresso after school. But he did not mind. He didn't need them. He knew they were weak. None of them could hold out, depend on themselves, spurn comfort if they had to. Some of them would go under in life. And none of them could cleave the water as he did or possessed a hard, streamlined, perfectly tuned body like he did.

Then, when he was nearly seventeen all this changed. His father, who was an engineer, though proud of his son's trophies, suddenly pressed him to different forms of success. The headmaster no longer shielded him from the physics master. He said: 'You can't swim into your future.' Out of spite perhaps or an odd consistency of self-denial, he dropped swimming altogether rather than cut it down. For a year and a half he worked at his maths and physics with the same single-mindedness with which he had perfected his sport. He knew about mechanics and engineering because he knew how to make his body move through water. His work was not merely competent but good. He got to university where he might have had the leisure, if he wished, to resume his swimming. But he did not. Two years are a long gap in a swimmer's training; two years when you are near your peak can mean you will never get back to your true form. Sometimes he went for a dip in the university pool and swam slowly up and down amongst practising members of the university team, whom perhaps he could still have beaten, as a kind of relief.

Often, Mr Singleton dreamt about swimming. He would be moving through vast expanses of water, an ocean. As he moved it did not require any effort at all. Sometimes he would go for long distances under water, but he did not have to bother about breathing. The water would be silvery-grey. And always it seemed that as he swam he was really trying to get beyond the water, to put it behind him, as if it were a veil he were parting and he would emerge on the other side of it at last, on to some pristine shore, where he would step where no one else had stepped before.

When he made love to his wife her body got in the way; he wanted to swim through her.

Mrs Singleton raised herself, pushed her sun-glasses up over her dark hair and sat with her arms stretched straight behind her back. A trickle of sweat ran between her breasts. They had developed to a good size since her schoolgirl days. Her skinniness in youth had stood her in good stead against the filling out of middle age, and her body was probably more mellow, more lithe and better proportioned now than it had ever been. She looked at Paul and Mr Singleton half immersed in the shallows. It seemed to her that her husband was the real boy, standing stubbornly upright with his hands before him, and that Paul was some toy being pulled and swung relentlessly around him and towards him as though on some string. They had seen her sit up. Her husband waved, holding the boy's hand, as though for the two of them. Paul did not wave; he seemed more concerned with the water in his eyes. Mrs Singleton did not wave back. She would have done if her son had waved. When they had left for their holiday Mr Singleton had said to Paul, 'You'll learn to swim this time. In salt water, you know, it's easier.' Mrs Singleton hoped her son wouldn't swim; so that she could wrap him, still, in the big yellow towel when he came out, rub him dry and warm, and watch her husband stand apart, his hands empty.

She watched Mr Singleton drop his arm back to his side. 'If you wouldn't splash it wouldn't go in your eyes,' she just caught him say.

The night before, in their hotel room, they had argued. They always argued about half way through their holidays. It was symbolic, perhaps, of that first trip to Greece, when he had somehow refused to enjoy himself. They had to incur injuries so that they could then appreciate their leisure, like convalescents. For the first four days or so of their holiday Mr Singleton would tend to be moody, on edge. He would excuse this as 'winding down', the not-to-be-hurried process of dispelling the pressures of work. Mrs Singleton would be patient. On about the fifth day Mrs Singleton would begin to suspect that the winding down would never end and indeed (which she had known all along) that it was not winding down at all — he was clinging, as to a defence, to his bridges and tunnels; and she would show her resentment. At this point Mr Singleton would retaliate by an attack upon her indolence.

Last night he had called her 'flabby'. He could not mean, of course, 'flabby-bodied' (she could glance down, now, at her still flat



belly), though such a sensual attack would have been simpler, almost heartening, from him. He meant 'flabby of attitude'. And what he meant by this, or what he wanted to mean, was that *he* was not flabby; that he worked, facing the real world, erecting great solid things on the face of the land, and that, whilst he worked, he disdained work's rewards — money, pleasure, rich food, holidays abroad — that he hadn't 'gone soft', as she had done since they graduated eleven years ago, with their credentials for the future and their plane tickets to Greece. She knew this toughness of her husband was only a cover for his own failure to relax and his need to keep his distance. She knew that he found no particular virtue in his bridges and tunnels (it was the last thing he wanted to do really — build); it didn't matter if they were right or wrong, they were there, he could point to them as if it vindicated him — just as when he made his infrequent, if seismic love to her it was not a case of enjoyment or satisfaction; he just did it.

It was hot in their hotel room. Mr Singleton stood in his blue pyjama bottoms, feet apart, like a PT instructor.

'Flabby? What do you mean — "flabby"!?' she had said, looking daunted.

But Mrs Singleton had the advantage whenever Mr Singleton accused her in this way of complacency, of weakness. She knew he only did it to hurt her, and so to feel guilty, and so to feel the remorse which would release his own affection for her, his vulnerability, his own need to be loved. Mrs Singleton was used to this process, to the tenderness that was the tenderness of successively opened and reopened wounds. And she was used to being the nurse who took care of the healing scars. For though Mr Singleton inflicted the first blow he would always make himself more guilty than he made her suffer, and Mrs Singleton, though in pain herself, could not resist wanting to clasp and cherish her husband, wanting to wrap him up safe when his own weakness and submissiveness showed and his body became liquid and soft against her; could not resist the old spur that her husband was unhappy and it was for her to make him happy. Mr Singleton was extraordinarily lovable when he was guilty. She would even have yielded indefinitely, foregoing her own grievance, to this extreme of comforting him for the pain he caused her, had she not discovered, in time, that this only pushed the process a stage further. Her forgiveness of him became only another level of comfort, of softness he must reject. His flesh shrank from her restoring touch.

She thought: men go round in circles, women don't move.

She kept to her side of the hotel bed, he, with his face turned, to his. He lay like a person washed up on a beach. She reached out her hand and stroked the nape of his neck. She felt him tense. All this was a pattern.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I didn't mean —'

'It's all right, it doesn't matter.'

'Doesn't it matter?' he said.

When they reached this point they were like miners racing each other for deeper and deeper seams of guilt and recrimination.

But Mrs Singleton had given up delving to rock bottom. Perhaps it was five years ago when she had thought for the third time of leaving her husband, perhaps long before that. When they were students she'd made allowances for his constraints, his reluctances. An unhappy childhood perhaps, a strict upbringing. She thought his inhibition might be lifted by the sanction of marriage. She'd thought, after all, it would be a good thing if he married her. She had not thought what would be good for her. They stood outside Gatwick Airport, back from Greece, in the grey, wet August light. Their tanned skin had seemed to glow. Yet she'd known this mood of promise would pass. She watched him kick against contentment, against ease, against the long, glittering life-line she threw to him; and, after a while, she ceased to try to haul him in. She began to imagine again her phantom artists. She thought: people slip off the shores of the real world, back into dreams. She hadn't 'gone soft', only gone back to herself. Hidden inside her like treasure there were lines of Leopardi, of Verlaine her husband would never appreciate. She thought, he doesn't need me, things run off him, like water. She even thought that her husband's neglect in making love to her was not a problem he had but a deliberate scheme to deny her. When Mrs Singleton desired her husband she could not help herself. She would stretch back on the bed with the sheets pulled off like a blissful nude in a Modigliani. She thought this ought to gladden a man. Mr Singleton would stand at the foot of the bed and gaze down at her. He looked like some strong, chaste knight in the legend of the Grail. He would respond to her invitation, but before he did so there would be this expression, half stern, half innocent, in his eyes. It was the sort of expression that good men in books and films are supposed to make to prostitutes. It would ensure that their love making was marred and that afterwards it would seem as if he had performed something out of duty that only

she wanted. Her body would feel like stone. It was at such times, when she felt the cold, dead-weight feel of abused happiness, that Mrs Singleton most thought she was through with Mr Singleton. She would watch his strong, compact torso already lifting itself off the bed. She would think: he thinks he is tough, contained in himself, but he won't see what I offer him, he doesn't see how it is I who can help him.

Mrs Singleton lay back on her striped towel on the sand. Once again she became part of the beach. The careless sounds of the seaside, of excited children's voices, of languid grownups', of wooden bats on balls, fluttered over her as she shut her eyes. She thought: it is the sort of day on which someone suddenly shouts, 'Someone is drowning.'

When Mrs Singleton became pregnant she felt she had outmanoeuvred her husband. He did not really want a child (it was the last thing he wanted, Mrs Singleton thought, a child), but he was jealous of her condition, as of some achievement he himself could attain. He was excluded from the little circle of herself and her womb, and, as though to puncture it, he began for the first time to make love to her of a kind where he took the insistent initiative. Mrs Singleton was not greatly pleased. She seemed buoyed up by her own bigness. She noticed that her husband began to do exercises in the morning, in his underpants, press-ups, squat-jumps, as if he were getting in training for something. He was like a boy. He even became, as the term of her pregnancy drew near its end, resilient and detached again, the virile father waiting to receive the son (Mr Singleton knew it would be a son, so did Mrs Singleton) that she, at the appointed time, would deliver him. When the moment arrived he insisted on being present so as to prove he wasn't squeamish and to make sure he wouldn't be tricked in the transaction. Mrs Singleton was not daunted. When the pains became frequent she wasn't at all afraid. There were big, watery lights clawing down from the ceiling of the delivery room like the lights in dentists' surgeries. She could just see her husband looking down at her. His face was white and clammy. It was his fault for wanting to be there. She had to push, as though away from him. Then she knew it was happening. She stretched back. She was a great surface of warm, splitting rock and Paul was struggling bravely up into the sunlight. She had to coax him with her cries. She felt him emerge like a trapped survivor. The doctor groped with rubber gloves. 'There we are,' he said. She managed to look at Mr Singleton. She wanted suddenly to put him

back inside for good where Paul had come from. With a fleeting pity she saw that this was what Mr Singleton wanted too. His eyes were half closed. She kept hers on him. He seemed to wilt under her gaze. All his toughness and control were draining from him and she was glad. She lay back triumphant and glad. The doctor was holding Paul; but she looked, beyond, at Mr Singleton. He was far away like an insect. She knew he couldn't hold out. He was going to faint. He was looking where her legs were spread. His eyes went out of focus. He was going to faint, keel over, right there on the spot.

Mrs Singleton grew restless, though she lay unmoving on the beach. Wasps were buzzing close to her head, round their picnic bag. She thought that Mr Singleton and Paul had been too long at their swimming lesson. They should come out. It never struck her, hot as she was, to get up and join her husband and son in the sea. Whenever Mrs Singleton wanted a swim she would wait until there was an opportunity to go in by herself; then she would wade out, dip her shoulders under suddenly and paddle about contentedly, keeping her hair dry, as though she were soaking herself in a large bath. They did not bathe as a family; nor did Mrs Singleton swim with Mr Singleton — who now and then, too, would get up by himself and enter the sea, swim at once about fifty yards out, then cruise for long stretches, with a powerful crawl or butterfly, back and forth across the bay. When this happened Mrs Singleton would engage her son in talk so he would not watch his father. Mrs Singleton did not swim with Paul either. He was too old, now, to cradle between her knees in the very shallow water, and she was somehow afraid that while Paul splashed and kicked around her he would suddenly learn how to swim. She had this feeling that Paul would only swim while she was in the sea, too. She did not want this to happen, but it reassured her and gave her sufficient confidence to let Mr Singleton continue his swimming lessons with Paul. These lessons were obsessive, indefatigable. Every Sunday morning at seven, when they were at home, Mr Singleton would take Paul to the baths for yet another attempt. Part of this, of course, was that Mr Singleton was determined that his son should swim; but it enabled him also to avoid the Sunday morning languor: extra hours in bed, leisurely love-making.

Once, in a room at college, Mr Singleton had told Mrs Singleton about his swimming, about his training sessions, races; about what it felt like when you could swim really well. She had run her fingers over his long, naked back.

Mrs Singleton sat up and rubbed sun-tan lotion on to her thighs. Down near the water's edge, Mr Singleton was standing about waist deep, supporting Paul who, gripped by his father's hands, water wings still on, was flailing, face down, at the surface. Mr Singleton kept saying, 'No, keep still.' He was trying to get Paul to hold his body straight and relaxed so he would float. But each time as Paul nearly succeeded he would panic, fearing his father would let go, and thrash wildly. When he calmed down and Mr Singleton held him, Mrs Singleton could see the water running off his face like tears.

Mrs Singleton did not alarm herself at this distress of her son. It was a guarantee against Mr Singleton's influence, an assurance that Paul was not going to swim; nor was he to be imbued with any of his father's sullen hardness. When Mrs Singleton saw her son suffer, it pleased her and she felt loving towards him. She felt that an invisible thread ran between her and the boy which commanded him not to swim, and she felt that Mr Singleton knew that it was because of her that his efforts with Paul were in vain. Even now, as Mr Singleton prepared for another attempt, the boy was looking at her smoothing the sun-tan oil on to her legs.

'Come on, Paul,' said Mr Singleton. His wet shoulders shone like metal.

When Paul was born it seemed to Mrs Singleton that her life with her husband was dissolved, as a mirage dissolves, and that she could return again to what she was before she knew him. She let her staved-off hunger for happiness and her old suppressed dreams revive. But then they were not dreams, because they had a physical object and she knew she needed them in order to live. She did not disguise from herself what she needed. She knew that she wanted the kind of close, even erotic relationship with her son that women who have rejected their husbands have been known to have. The kind of relationship in which the son must hurt the mother, the mother the son. But she willed it, as if there would be no pain. Mrs Singleton waited for her son to grow. She trembled when she thought of him at eighteen or twenty. When he was grown he would be slim and light and slender, like a boy even though he was a man. He would not need a strong body because all his power would be inside. He would be all fire and life in essence. He would become an artist, a sculptor. She would pose for him naked (she would keep her body trim for this), and he would sculpt her. He would hold the chisel. His hands would guide the cold metal over the stone and

its blows would strike sunlight.

Mrs Singleton thought: all the best statues they had seen in Greece seemed to have been dredged up from the sea.

She finished rubbing the lotion on to her insteps and put the cap back on the tube. As she did so she heard something that made her truly alarmed. It was Mr Singleton saying, 'That's it, that's the way! At last! Now keep it going!' She looked up. Paul was in the same position as before but he had learnt to make slower, regular motions with his limbs and his body no longer sagged in the middle. Though he still wore the water-wings he was moving, somewhat laboriously, forwards so that Mr Singleton had to walk along with him; and at one point Mr Singleton removed one of his hands from under the boy's ribs and simultaneously looked at his wife and smiled. His shoulders flashed. It was not a smile meant for her. She could see that. And it was not one of her husband's usual, infrequent, rather mechanical smiles. It was the smile a person makes about some joy inside, hidden and incommunicable.

'That's enough,' thought Mrs Singleton, getting to her feet, pretending not to have noticed, behind her sun-glasses, what had happened in the water. It *was* enough: they had been in the water for what seemed like an hour. He was only doing it because of their row last night, to make her feel he was not outmatched by using the reserve weapon of Paul. And, she added with relief to herself, Paul still had the water-wings and one hand to support him.

'That's enough now!' she shouted aloud, as if she were slightly, but not ill-humouredly, peeved at being neglected. 'Come on in now!' She had picked up her purse as a quickly conceived ruse as she got up and as she walked towards the water's edge she waved it above her head. 'Who wants an ice-cream?'

Mr Singleton ignored his wife. 'Well done, Paul,' he said. 'Let's try that again.'

Mrs Singleton knew he would do this. She stood on the little ridge of sand just above where the beach, becoming fine shingle, shelved into the sea. She replaced a loose strap of her bikini over her shoulder and with a finger of each hand pulled the bottom half down over her buttocks. She stood feet apart, slightly on her toes, like a gymnast. She knew other eyes on the beach would be on her. It flattered her that she — and her husband, too — received admiring glances from those around. She thought, with relish for the irony: perhaps they think we are happy, beautiful people. For all her girlhood diffidence, Mrs Singleton enjoyed displaying her

attractions, and she liked to see other people's pleasure. When she lay sunbathing she imagined making love to all the moody, pubescent boys on holiday with their parents, with their slim waists and their quick heels.

'See if you can do it without me holding you,' said Mr Singleton. 'I'll help you at first.' He stooped over Paul. He looked like a mechanic making final adjustments to some prototype machine.

'Don't you want an ice-cream then, Paul?' said Mrs Singleton. 'They've got those chocolate ones.'

Paul looked up. His short wet hair stood up in spikes. He looked like a prisoner offered a chance of escape, but the plastic water-wings, like some absurd pillory, kept him fixed.

Mrs Singleton thought: he crawled out of me; now I have to lure him back with ice-cream.

'Can't you see he was getting the hang of it?' Mr Singleton said. 'If he comes out now he'll —'

'Hang of it! It was you. You were holding him all the time.'

She thought: perhaps I am hurting my son.

Mr Singleton glared at Mrs Singleton. He gripped Paul's shoulders. 'You don't want to get out now, do you Paul?' He looked suddenly as if he really might drown Paul rather than let him come out.

Mrs Singleton's heart raced. She wasn't good at rescues, at resuscitations. She knew this because of her life with her husband.

'Come on, you can go back in later,' she said.

Paul was a hostage. She was playing for time, not wanting to harm the innocent.

She stood on the sand like a marooned woman watching for ships. The sea, in the sheltered bay, was almost flat calm. A few, glassy waves idled in but were smoothed out before they could break. On the headlands there were outcrops of scaly rocks like basking lizards. The island in Greece had been where Theseus left Ariadne. Out over the blue water, beyond the heads of bobbing swimmers, seagulls flapped like scraps of paper.

Mr Singleton looked at Mrs Singleton. She was a fussy mother daubed with Ambre Solaire, trying to bribe her son with silly ice-creams; though if you forgot this she was a beautiful, tanned girl, like the girls men imagine on desert islands. But then, in Mr Singleton's dreams, there was no one else on the untouched shore he ceaselessly swam to.

He thought, if Paul could swim, then I could leave her.

Mrs Singleton looked at her husband. She felt afraid. The water's edge was like a dividing line between them which marked off the territory in which each existed. Perhaps they could never cross over.

'Well, I'm getting the ice-creams: you'd better get out.'

She turned and paced up the sand. Behind the beach was an ice-cream van painted like a fairground.

Paul Singleton looked at his mother. He thought: she is deserting me — or I am deserting her. He wanted to get out to follow her. Her feet made puffs of sand which stuck to her ankles, and you could see all her body as she strode up the beach. But he was afraid of his father and his gripping hands. And he was afraid of his mother, too. How she would wrap him, if he came out, in the big yellow towel like egg yolk, how she would want him to get close to her smooth, sticky body, like a mouth that would swallow him. He thought: the yellow towel humiliated him, his father's hands humiliated him. The water-wings humiliated him: you put them on and became a puppet. So much of life is humiliation. It was how you won love. His father was taking off the water-wings like a man unlocking a chastity belt. He said: 'Now try the same, coming towards me.' His father stood some feet away from him. He was a huge, straight man, like the pier of a bridge. 'Try.' Paul Singleton was six. He was terrified of water. Every time he entered it he had to fight down fear. His father never realized this. He thought it was simple; you said: 'Only water, no need to be afraid.' His father did not know what fear was; the same as he did not know what fun was. Paul Singleton hated water. He hated it in his mouth and in his eyes. He hated the chlorine smell of the swimming baths, the wet, slippery tiles, the echoing whoops and screams. He hated it when his father read to him from *The Water Babies*. It was the only story his father read, because, since he didn't know fear or fun, he was really sentimental. His mother read lots of stories. 'Come on then. I'll catch you.' Paul Singleton held out his arms and raised one leg. This was the worst moment. Perhaps having no help was most humiliating. If you did not swim you sank like a statue. They would drag him out, his skin streaming. His father would say: 'I didn't mean . . .' But if he swam his mother would be forsaken. She would stand on the beach with chocolate ice-cream running down her arm. There was no way out; there were all these things to be afraid of and no weapons. But then, perhaps he was not afraid of his mother nor his father, nor of water, but of something else. He had felt it just now — when he'd struck out with rhythmic, reaching

strokes and his feet had come off the bottom and his father's hand had slipped from under his chest: as if he had mistaken what his fear was; as if he had been unconsciously pretending, even to himself, so as to execute some plan. He lowered his chin into the water. 'Come on!' said Mr Singleton. He launched himself forward and felt the sand leave his feet and his legs wriggle like cut ropes. 'There,' said his father as he realized. 'There!' His father stood like a man waiting to clasp a lover; there was a gleam on his face. 'Towards me! Towards me!' said his father suddenly. But he kicked and struck, half in panic, half in pride, away from his father, away from the shore, away, in this strange new element that seemed all his own.