

Honeymoon

Was it her idea? Mine? I have forgotten. We agree on all things, breathe almost in punctilious synchrony, penetrate each other, *are* each other in every configuration one could say of body, mind and soul. So the idea of returning to San Remo after twenty years so tantalised, tickled and finally captured both our imaginations that who suggested and who accepted became a mote lost in the jelly of our mutual concurrence.

So here we are, in the crook of a serrated secluded crescent of white beach, she gorging the sun with every exposed pore of her roasting flesh, the darting curious seagulls cawing around her with splintering shrillness, while I sit on a wet jag of rock behind her watching the slow modulation of her breathing, with my eyes fingering her outline and her crevices, their feel still soft and delicious, her skin glistening with the oily sheen of plush brown velvet. If I were to kiss her now, she would taste once more of salt and seaweed and would, I know, with her own lips inflame my flesh to stupidity and fill it, even as she did so long ago, with throbbing and electric heat and seething. She has not lost the trick.

She has filled out, the sharper youthful bones of her shoulders and hips moulded rather than curved into accurate smoothness. Her breasts are that bit bulkier and her thighs fuller, and here and there a stretch mark or a small redundancy of flesh has stolen in. But then I, too, am no longer that slender elastic-fleshed fellow she married. Creeping stoutness is over-

taking me and if it is the work of biological necessity neither of us wages a concerted struggle against it. Vanity is not a dominant trait in our natures, unlike our girls Jessica and Cinnamon for whom the mirror is the pivot of their swelling adolescence. Sensibly, our bodies are to us mere vehicles for the work we have to do. In the darkness, we touch, feel, explore, fuse and cling, and then we become aware anew of the malleability and galvanism of flesh, yes. But the twenty-four day is also composed of light and the hours of light are given to the pressures of the office and the classroom and then the only demands made upon our bodies are not that they retain their youth, but that they preserve their health.

The sun above is heat, is fire. An aureole of punishing yellow spears hurled through limpid unresisting blue space by the smiting blinding disc at its core. The sea alone dares to return its barbs, but these leap only a mite above the blue-green surface and cover the waters of the bay with a laminated wafer of glinting splinters. For the rest, the white sand, the crags, the shrubs and the clusters of bracken and gorse that pepper the shaggy verge between beach and road – these absorb its fury, humbled into torpid submission.

It is this same torpidity that now envelops Madeleine on whose smooth velvet a film of perspiration gathers. Her eyes are shielded by rimmed polaroids, her palms are turned outward by her side, a knee is crooked upright – ever her favourite position by the sea, a pose that has not altered in twenty years when, just married, we lay side by side in this spot, sometimes talking, more often silent, letting mere presence replace the function of speech.

But when we talked –

The world stretched, bewitchingly, before us. The Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic, and beyond, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Venice; Botticellis and Rembrandts; Covent Garden and the Opera; canals and Swiss Alps. Music to be heard, art to be savoured, theatre to be gorged. And, in time, the return to take up the reins of living, of work, and in precious hours to write, to create the books that coursed through the avid blood

some day certain to bring fulfilment, contentment and renown.

Oh, God, if there was a God – the love He instilled in us for one another . . .

The sun battered us then, too, and we would rise up and run and bound tittering through the shallows, spraying diaphanous green jewels over one another and tread warily over giant boulders cropped with washed green lichen and bathed in slime and over cracking crunching pebbles or dance upon their slippery condensations or sway upon rocky knuckles like crazy clowns teetering on tightropes. Around us, the glassy water lapped our ankles, and our toes and our feet sank into the frail yielding sand. But, on stepping back, the forked fangs of the frothy slithering waves filled in our prints and obduracy their essence erased our every effort to leave behind the most minute trace of permanence. Only a shallow etching of our names into a greasy boulder did we leave but moss and slate and clinging black shells have long ago healed the surface wound and obliterated the scar that we had, with love, scratched into that stone.

But do I care?

No . . . And yes.

This quest for permanence, for immortality – it is merely another form of vanity. If the body, the mind, the soul cannot be left on earth as a memorial to one's passage through it, then perhaps one's name may give testimony to a life lived and breathed. But what is the gain in preserving a name when it is a hollow within and not bolstered without by any lasting works, by any buttresses that may honour it?

I ask myself. Tasting the sap of resignation, I ask myself do I care and, gazing across the film-decked vastness of the blue-green ocean before me, piercing the blueness of space to its infinity and the blankness of future time to its eternity, I answer: no. A man is an insect. Eats and shits and breathes and buzzes about fussily for a while and then sinks into eternal sleep. What then is a name?

But the sap is bitter. Those books I had promised to write.

The museums, the galleries, the theatres we had planned to visit.

Madeleine.

Before me she lies while the yellow spears of the seething sun scorch her face, her belly, her legs, her tanned skin moist and gleaming, asleep perhaps, perhaps dreaming, as she so often dreams, about Jessica and Cinnamon or about the school where she teaches ten months of the year or about me who shares her pulse, her breathing, her mind.

We have in twenty years established our own home, raised two girls to bulging adolescence, scratched out with persistence our occupational niche to the point where work is no longer the task of Sisyphus that once brought us nightly to the brink of exhaustion. Our house, two-storied, is an edifice of solid brown brick. A double carport stands beneath it and landscaped gardens front and back bloom and glow with the variegated splash of roses, hydrangeas and huge chrysanthemums and smell with the nurtured redolence of ripening plums and apples and teeth-tingling lemons. Madeleine is forty-two, I have just turned forty-seven. Around us, past neighbours have moved away; friends have drifted or more sadly, have died; marriages have floundered and collapsed; the children of acquaintances have fled their homes and succumbed to drugs or been seduced by all manner of exotic sects promising . . . promising whatever promises the wild-eyed rebellious children are prepared to accept. We have remained firm, intact, our quartet, Madeleine and I, Jessica and Cinnamon, giving succour to those who, distressed or aggrieved or hurt, need another's ear, a shoulder, a word in place.

Ours then is the model life – an envied life, of unshirked industry and good temper and sobriety directed ever towards stability, security, a sound education for the girls with piano, ballet, tennis and art lessons on the shoulders of the more formal instruction of orthodox schooling. In addition to her regular teaching, Madeleine takes night classes as well, while I set out in the early morning to the office, endure an endless

succession of meetings, discussions and deliberations, and return home at eight in the evening or nine, not exhausted but neither inclined to do more than sit with legs elevated before the television set, not actively absorbing but letting the inane programmes seep into me as though I were a ready sponge. When we come together, Madelaine and I talk less of the theatre and of other places, less of music and art, not at all of the Alps in Switzerland and the Venetian canals, but more of insurance policies and mortgages, of new shoes for Jessica and a dress for Cinnamon, of how the neighbour has left his garbage strewn over the pavement and of how Sandra Carr next door keeps her awake with her cacophonous scrapings on the violin.

Within me, a book is waiting . . .

Madeleine stirs, shakes her head to disperse the sand that has gathered in her hair. With a springy movement, she props herself up on her forearms, raises her polaroids to her crown and squints at me. The cupolas of her cheeks are a roasted reddish brown against which the hoops around her eyes where the rims of her glasses have nestled are pale garlands concertinaed into delicate folds. With the tips of her fingers she waves, daintily, coquettishly. My gaze once more sweeps over her form, laps her contour contained in a tight bathing suit the colour of an opening carnation and probes the crevices she has to offer.

Within me, a book is waiting. And there are places to visit, different experiences to savour.

A wind, bearing salt and seaweed on its tail, germinates out of the sea. The green water shimmers with twinkling fragmented wavelets. The frothy fangs extend deeper into our arc of sand and scrub. And behind us, the shrubs sway soundlessly as puffs of sand rise and sprinkle their lower oscillating branches. My nostrils tingle with the breeze. There is a hollow ringing in my ears, a reverberation, an echo, a muted quivering resonance.

'Give it all up,' I hear. 'This is not you. Give it up.'

Our prints in the sand have vanished; our names etched

upon the greasy boulder have been obliterated. But there is still time to leave behind a mark. Sell the house, repay the mortgage, settle for a small flat, resign the directorships, square off the overdrafts, squeeze the purse a little tighter. Shut yourself from the intruding world and nurse your dream, come out of yourself, of *your* self, your true aching burning so-long-suppressed self, once more to explore the depths of your soul as you did twenty years ago when the world stretched so wide, so far, so bewitchingly before you.

'Decide. Act. If not now . . . if not now . . .'

Madeleine stands up, shakes the towel free of sand, approaches me. Her toes slip into the thin white sand which sprinkles off her feet as she steps nearer. Her hips rock with a heavy motion, her breasts heave, her lips are taut in the concentration of effort as she wades through the giving sand. She reaches out a hand to me.

'I just dreamt about you,' she says, 'and our honeymoon here twenty years ago.'

'If not now . . .'

'Madeleine,' I want to say. 'What have we done with our lives? We are comfortable, people envy us our harmony, but what have we achieved, for all our wants and our dreams? Madeleine, where did we go wrong? Let us turn time back these twenty years and start again. We are not young anymore, but nor are we too old. Let's go away! Let us hear, see, feel! There are books still burning within me. Perhaps there is still a chance to leave a name.'

She has taken my hand, smiles. Her eyes squint faintly and there is the slightest parting of the lips which shows a line of her glistening white teeth.

'Even after all these years, I still love you,' she says.

And as I look into her still-fresh, still-lovely face, it hurts me, it physically hurts me to see that she is happy and content, and I cannot bring myself to spoil that contentment. Instead, I hold her riveted to myself, let our configurations fuse once more, cling to her with the desperate mighty clasp of possession and, hungrily, insatiably, hopelessly, kiss her

shoulders, her ears, her cheeks, knowing with silent agony that in her embrace there passes through this world an anonymous life destined to whimper out slowly in an unmarked death.