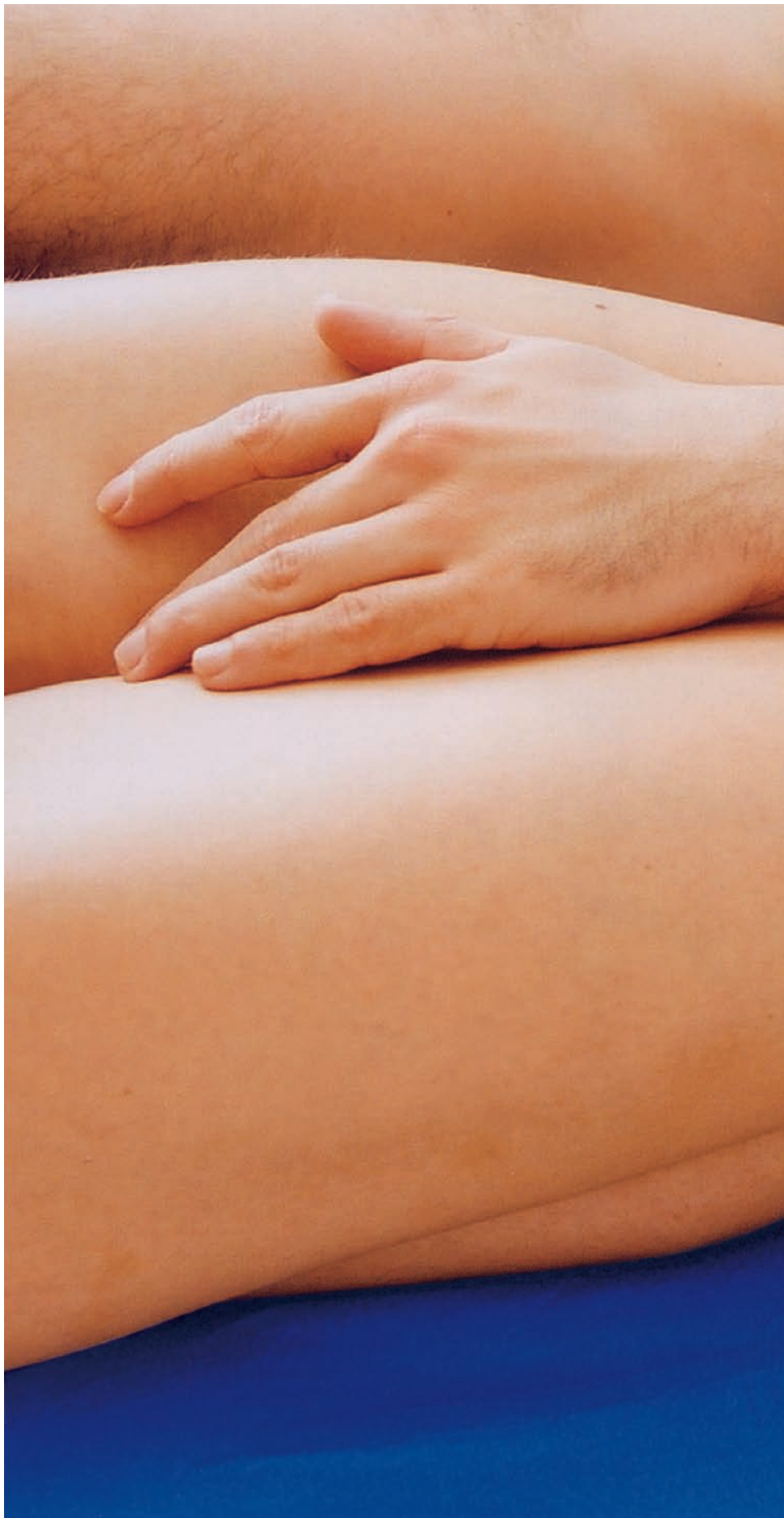


They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible. But it is never easy. They were sitting down to supper in a tiny room on the second floor of a Georgian inn in Dorset. In the next room, visible through the open door, was a fourposter bed, rather narrow, whose cover was pure white and stretched startlingly smooth, as though by no human hand. Edward did not mention that he had never stayed in a hotel before, whereas Florence, after many trips as a child with her father, was an old hand. Superficially, they were in fine spirits. Their wedding, at St. Mary's, Oxford, had gone well; the service had been decorous, the reception jolly, the sendoff from school and college friends raucous and uplifting. Her parents had not condescended to his, as they had feared, and his mother had not significantly misbehaved, or completely forgotten the purpose of the occasion. The couple had driven away in a small car belonging to Florence's mother and arrived in the early evening at their hotel on the coast in weather that was not perfect for mid-June or the circumstances but was entirely adequate: it was not raining, but nor was it quite warm enough, according to Florence, to eat outside on the terrace, as they had hoped. Edward thought that it was, but, polite to a fault, he would not think of contradicting her on such an evening.

So they were eating in their rooms before partially open French windows that gave onto a balcony and a view of a portion of the English Channel, and of Chesil Beach with its infinite shingle. Two youths in dinner jackets served them from a trolley parked outside in the corridor, and their comings and goings through what was generally known as the honeymoon suite made the waxed oak boards squeak comically against the silence. Proud and protective, Edward watched closely for any gesture or expression that might have seemed satirical. He could not have tolerated any sniggering. But these lads from a nearby village went about their business with bowed backs and closed faces, and their manner was tentative; their hands shook as they set items down on the starched linen tablecloth. They were nervous, too.

This was not a good moment in the history of English cuisine, but no one





FICTION

ON CHESIL BEACH

BY IAN MCEWAN

much minded at the time, except visitors from abroad. The formal meal began, as so many did then, with a slice of melon decorated with a single glazed cherry. Out in the corridor, in silver dishes on candle-heated plate warmers, waited slices of long-ago roasted beef in a thickened gravy, soft boiled vegetables, and potatoes of a bluish hue. The wine was from France, though no particular region was mentioned on the label, which was embellished with a solitary darting swallow. It would not have crossed Edward's mind to order a red.

Desperate for the waiters to leave, he and Florence turned in their chairs to consider the view—of a broad mossy lawn and, beyond, a tangle of flowering shrubs and trees clinging to a steep bank, almost a cliff, that descended to a lane that led to the beach. They could see the beginnings of a footpath, dropping by muddy steps, a way lined by weeds of extravagant size, giant rhubarb and cabbages, they looked

like, with swollen stalks more than six feet tall, bending under the weight of dark, thick-veined leaves. The garden vegetation rose before them, sensuous and tropical in its profusion, an effect heightened by the gray, soft light and a delicate mist drifting in from the sea, whose distant steady motion made lapping and sucking sounds against the grating pebbles. Their plan was to change into rough shoes after supper and walk on the shingle, between the sea and the lagoon known as the Fleet, and if they had not finished the wine they would take that with them, and swig from the bottle like gentlemen of the road.

And they had so many plans, giddy plans, heaped up before them in the hazy future, as richly tangled as the early-summer flora of the Dorset coast, and as beautiful—where and how they would live, who their close friends would be, his job with her father's firm, her musical career and what to do with the money her father had given her, and how they would

not be like other people, at least, not inwardly. This was still the era—it would end later in that famous decade—when to be young was a social encumbrance, a mark of irrelevance, a faintly embarrassing condition for which marriage was the beginning of a cure. Almost strangers, they stood, strangely together, on a fresh pinnacle of existence, gleeful that their new status promised to promote them out of their endless youth—Edward and Florence, free at last! One of their favorite topics was their childhoods, not so much the pleasures as the fog of comical misconceptions from which they had emerged, and the various parental errors and outdated practices they could now forgive.

From these heights they could see clearly, but they could not describe to each other certain contradictory feelings: they separately worried about the moment, sometime soon after dinner, when their new maturity would be tested, when they would lie down together on the fourposter bed and reveal themselves fully to each other. For more than a year, Edward had been mesmerized by the prospect that on the evening of a given date in June the most sensitive portion of himself would reside, however briefly, within a naturally formed cavity inside this cheerful, pretty, formidably intelligent woman. How this was to be achieved without absurdity, or disappointment, troubled him. His specific worry, based on one unfortunate experience, was of overexcitement, of what he had heard someone describe as "arriving too soon." The matter was rarely out of his thoughts, but though his fear of failure was great, his eagerness—for rapture, for resolution—was far greater.

Florence's anxieties were more serious, and there had been moments during the journey from Oxford when she'd thought she was about to draw on all her courage to speak her mind. But what troubled her was unutterable, and she could barely frame it for herself. Where he merely suffered conventional first-night nerves, she experienced a visceral dread, a helpless disgust as palpable as seasickness. For much of the time, through all the months of merry wedding preparation, she had managed to ignore this stain on her happiness, but whenever her thoughts turned toward a close embrace—she preferred no other term—her stomach tightened dryly, and she felt



nausea at the back of her throat. In a modern, forward-looking handbook that was supposed to be helpful to young brides, with its cheery tones and exclamation marks and numbered illustrations, she had come across certain words and phrases that almost made her gag: "mucous membrane," and the sinister and glistening "glans." Other phrases offended her intelligence, particularly those concerning entrances: "Not long before he enters her. . ." Or "Now at last he enters her." And "Happily, soon after he has entered her. . ." Was she obliged on the night to transform herself for Edward into a kind of portal or drawing room through which he might process? Almost as frequent was a word that suggested to her nothing but pain, flesh parted before a knife: "penetration."

In optimistic moments, she tried to convince herself that she suffered from no more than a heightened form of squeamishness that was bound to pass. Certainly, the thought of Edward's testicles, pendulous below his "engorged penis"—another horrifying term—had the potency to make her upper lip curl, and the idea of herself being touched "down there" by someone else, even someone she loved, was as repulsive as, say, a surgical procedure on her eye. But her squeamishness did not extend to babies. She liked them; she had looked after her cousin's little boys on occasion and enjoyed herself. She thought that she would love being pregnant by Edward, and in the abstract, at least, she had no fears about childbirth. If only she could, like the mother of Jesus, arrive at that swollen state by magic.

Florence suspected that there was something profoundly wrong with her, that she had always been different, and that at last she was about to be exposed. Her problem, she thought, was greater, deeper, than straightforward physical disgust: her whole being was in revolt against the prospect of entanglement and flesh; her composure and essential happiness were about to be violated. She simply did not want to be "entered" or "penetrated." Sex with Edward could not be the summation of her joy but the price she must pay for it.

She knew that she should have spoken up long ago, as soon as he had proposed, long before the visit to the sincere and soft-spoken vicar, the dinners with their

respective parents, before the wedding guests were invited, the gift list devised and lodged with a department store, and the tent and the photographer hired, and all the other irreversible arrangements. But what could she have said? What possible terms could she have used, when she could not name the matter to herself? And she loved Edward, not with the hot, moist passion she had read about but warmly, deeply, sometimes like a daughter, sometimes almost maternally. She loved cuddling him, and having his enormous arm around her shoulders, and being kissed by him, though she disliked his tongue in her mouth and had wordlessly made this clear. She thought that he was original, unlike anyone she had ever met. He always had a paperback book, usually history, in his jacket pocket in case he found himself in a queue or a waiting room. He marked what he read with a pencil stub. He was virtually the only man Florence had met who did not smoke. None of his socks matched. He had only one tie, narrow, knitted, dark blue, which he wore nearly all the time with a white shirt. She adored his curious mind, his mild country accent, the huge strength of his hands, the unpredictable swerves and drifts of his conversation, his kindness to her, and the way his soft brown eyes, resting on her when she spoke, made her feel enveloped in a friendly cloud of love. At the age of twenty-two, she had no doubt that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Edward Mayhew. How could she have dared risk losing him?

There was no one she could have talked to. Ruth, her sister, was too young, and her mother, perfectly wonderful in her way, was too intellectual, too brittle, an old-fashioned bluestocking. Whenever she confronted an intimate problem, she tended to adopt the public manner of the lecture hall, and use longer and longer words, and make references to books that she thought everyone should have read. Only when the matter was safely bundled up in this way might she sometimes relax into kindness, though that was rare, and even then you had no idea what advice you were receiving. Florence had some terrific friends from school and music college who posed the opposite problem: they adored intimate talk and revelled in

one another's problems. They all knew one another, and were too eager with their phone calls and letters. She could not trust them with a secret, nor did she blame them, for she was part of the group. She would not have trusted herself. She was alone with a problem she did not know how to begin to address, and all she had in the way of help was her paperback guide. On its garish red cover were two smiling bug-eyed matchstick figures holding hands, drawn clumsily in white chalk, as though by an innocent child.



They ate the melon in less than two minutes while the lads, instead of waiting out in the corridor, stood well back, near the door, fingering their bow ties and tight collars and fiddling with their cuffs. Their blank expressions did not change as they observed Edward offer Florence, with an ironic flourish, his glazed cherry. Playfully, she sucked it from his fingers and held his gaze as she deliberately chewed, letting him see her tongue, conscious that in flirting with him like this she would be making matters worse for herself. She should not start what she could not sustain, but pleasing him in any way that she could was helpful: it made her feel less than entirely useless. If only eating a sticky cherry were all that was required.

To show that he wasn't troubled by the presence of the waiters, though he longed for them to leave, Edward smiled as he sat back with his wine and called over his shoulder, "Any more of those things?"

"Ain't none, sir. Sorry, sir."

But the hand that held the wineglass trembled as he struggled to contain his sudden happiness, his exaltation. Florence appeared to glow before him, and she was lovely—beautiful, sensuous, gifted, good-natured beyond belief.

The boy who had spoken nipped forward to clear away. His colleague was just outside the room, transferring the second course, the roast, to their plates. It was not possible to wheel the trolley into the honeymoon suite for the proper silver service on account of a two-step difference in level between the room and the corridor, a consequence of poor planning when the Elizabethan farmhouse was



“Georgianized” in the mid-eighteenth century.

The couple were briefly alone, though they heard the scrape of spoons on dishes, and the lads murmuring by the open door. Edward laid his hand over Florence’s and said, for the hundredth time that day, in a whisper, “I love you,” and she said it straight back, and she truly meant it.

Edward had a degree, a first in history from University College London. In three short years, he had studied wars, rebellions, famines, pestilences, the rise and collapse of empires, revolutions that consumed their children, agricultural hardship, industrial squalor, the cruelty of ruling élites—a colorful pageant of oppression, misery, and failed hopes. He understood how constrained and meagre lives could be, generation after generation. In the grand view of things, the peaceful, prosperous times that England was now experiencing were rare, and within them his and Florence’s joy was exceptional, even unique. In his final year he had made a special study of the “great man” theory of history—was it really outmoded to believe that forceful individuals could shape national destiny? Certainly his tutor thought so: in his view, History, properly capitalized, was a grand narrative, driven forward by in-

eluctable forces toward inevitable, necessary ends, and soon the subject would be understood as a science. But the lives that Edward had examined in detail—Caesar, Charlemagne, Frederick II, Catherine the Great, Nelson, and Napoleon (Stalin he had dropped, at his tutor’s insistence)—rather suggested the contrary. A ruthless personality, naked opportunism, and good luck, Edward had argued, could divert the fates of millions, a wayward conclusion that had earned him a B-minus, almost imperilling his first.

An incidental discovery was that even legendary success brought little happiness, only redoubled restlessness, gnawing ambition. As he was dressing for the wedding that morning (tails, top hat, a thorough drenching in cologne), he had decided that none of the figures on his list could have known his kind of satisfaction. His elation was a form of greatness in itself. Here he was, a gloriously fulfilled, or almost fulfilled, man. At the age of twenty-three, he had already outshone them all.

He was gazing at his wife now, into her intricately flecked hazel eyes, into those pure whites touched by a bloom of the faintest milky blue. The lashes were thick and dark, like a child’s, and there was something childlike, too, in the solemnity of her face at rest. It was a lovely

face, with a sculpted look that in a certain light brought to mind an American Indian woman, a highborn squaw. She had a strong jaw, and her smile was broad and artless, right into the creases at the corners of her eyes. She was big-boned—certain matrons at the wedding had knowingly remarked on her generous hips. Her breasts, which Edward had touched and even kissed, though nowhere near enough, were small. Her violinist’s hands were pale and powerful, her long arms likewise; at her school sports days she had been adept at throwing the javelin.

Edward had never cared for classical music, but now he was learning its sprightly argot—legato, pizzicato, con brio. Slowly, through brute repetition, he was coming to recognize and even like certain pieces. There was one that she played with her friends which especially moved him. When she practiced her scales and arpeggios at home, she wore a hair band, an endearing touch that caused him to dream about the daughter they might have one day. Florence’s playing was sinuous and exact, and she was known for the richness of her tone. One tutor said that he had never encountered a student who made an open string sing so warmly. When she was before the music stand in the rehearsal room in London, or in her room at her parents’ house in Oxford, with Edward sprawled on the bed, watching and desiring her, she held herself gracefully, with back straight and head lifted and tilted proudly, and read the music with a commanding, almost haughty expression that stirred him. That look had such certitude, such knowledge of the path to pleasure.

When the business was music, she was always confident and fluid in her movements—rosining a bow, restringing her instrument, rearranging the room to accommodate her three friends from college, for the string quartet that was her passion. She was the undisputed leader, and always had the final word in their many musical disagreements. But in the rest of her life she was surprisingly clumsy and unsure, forever stubbing a toe or knocking things over or bumping her head. The fingers that could manage the double stopping in a Bach partita were just as clever at dripping tea all over a linen tablecloth or dropping a glass onto a stone floor. She would trip over her own feet if she thought she was being watched—she

confided to Edward that she found it an ordeal to be in the street, walking toward a friend from a distance. And whenever she was anxious or too self-conscious her hand would rise repeatedly to her forehead to brush away an imaginary strand of hair, a gentle, fluttering motion that would continue long after the source of stress had vanished.

How could he fail to love someone so strangely and warmly particular, so painfully honest and self-aware, whose every thought and emotion appeared naked to view, streaming like charged particles through her changing expressions and gestures? Even without her strong-boned beauty he would have had to love her. And she loved him with such intensity, such excruciating physical reticence. Not only his passions, heightened by the lack of a proper outlet, but also his protective instincts were aroused. But was she really so vulnerable? He had peeped once into her school-report folder and seen her intelligence-test results: a hundred and fifty-two, seventeen points above his own score. This was an age when these quotients were held to measure something as tangible as height or weight. When he sat in on a rehearsal with the quartet, and she had a difference of opinion on a phrasing or tempo or dynamic with Charles, the chubby and assertive second violinist, whose face shone with late-flowering acne, Edward was intrigued by how cool Florence could be. She did not argue; she listened calmly, then announced her decision. No sign then of the little hair-brushing action. She knew her stuff, and she was determined to lead, the way the first violin should. She also seemed to be able to get her rather frightening father to do what she wanted. Many months before the wedding, he had, at her suggestion, offered Edward a job. Whether Edward really wanted it, or dared to refuse it, was another matter. And she had known, by some womanly osmosis, exactly what was needed at that celebration, from the size of the tent to the quantity of summer pudding, and just how much it was reasonable to expect her father to pay.

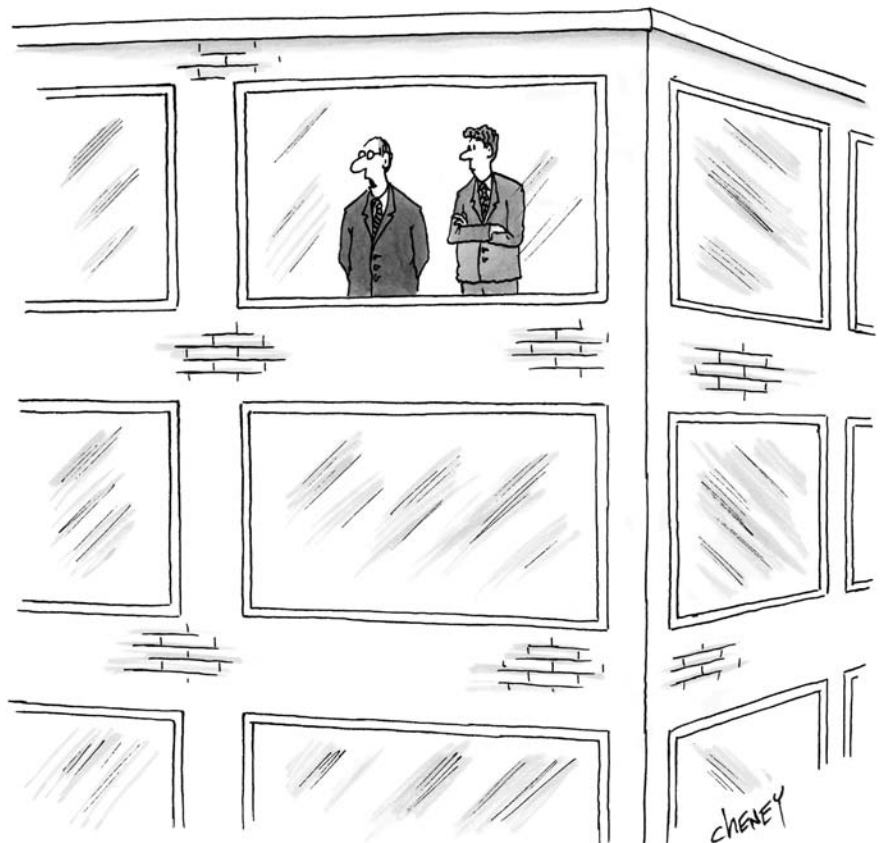
“Here it comes,” she whispered as she squeezed his hand, warning him off another sudden intimacy. The waiters were arriving with their plates of beef, his piled twice the height of hers. They

also brought sherry trifle and Cheddar cheese and mint chocolates, which they arranged on a sideboard. After mumbling advice about the summoning bell by the fireplace—it had to be pressed hard and held down—the lads withdrew, closing the door behind them with immense care. Then came the tinkling of the trolley retreating down the corridor, then, after a silence, a whoop or a hoot that could easily have come from the hotel bar downstairs, and, at last, the newlyweds were properly alone.

A shift or a strengthening of the wind brought them the sound of wavelets breaking on the shore below, like a distant shattering of glasses. The mist was lifting to reveal dense trees and foliage curving away above the shoreline to the east. They could see a luminous gray smoothness between the boughs and leaves which might have been the silky surface of the sea itself, or the lagoon, or the sky—it was difficult to tell. The altered breeze carried through the parted French windows an enticement, a salty scent of oxygen and open space that seemed at odds with the starched table

linen, the corn-flour-stiffened gravy, and the heavy polished silver they were taking in their hands. The wedding lunch had been huge and prolonged. They were not hungry. It was, in theory, open to them to abandon their plates, seize the wine bottle by the neck, and run down to the shore and kick their shoes off and exult in their liberty. There was no one in the hotel who would have wanted to stop them. They were adults at last, on holiday, free to do as they chose. In just a few years’ time, that would be the kind of thing that quite ordinary young people would do. But, for now, the times held them. Even when Edward and Florence were alone, a thousand unacknowledged rules still applied. It was precisely because they were adults that they did not do childish things like walk away from a meal that others had taken pains to prepare. It was dinnertime, after all. And being childlike was not yet honorable, or in fashion.

Still, Edward was troubled by the call of the beach, and if he had known how to propose it, or justify it, he might have suggested going out straightaway. The



“During my meteoric rise to the top, I failed to notice I was in the wrong building.”

ceiling, low enough already, appeared now nearer to his head, and closing in. Rising from his plate, mingling with the sea breeze, was a clammy odor, like the breath of the family dog. Perhaps he was not quite as joyous as he kept telling himself he was. He felt a terrible pressure narrowing his thoughts, constraining his speech, and he was in acute physical discomfort—his trousers or underwear seemed to have shrunk.

But if a genie had appeared at the table to grant Edward's most urgent request, he would not have asked for any beach in the world. All he wanted, all he could think of, was himself and Florence lying naked together on or in the bed next door, confronting at last that awesome experience which seemed as remote from daily life as a vision of religious ecstasy, or even death itself. The prospect—was it actually going to happen? to him?—once more sent cool fingers through his lower gut, and he caught himself in a momentary swooning motion that he concealed behind a contented sigh.

Like most young men of his time, or any time, without an easy manner, or a means of sexual expression, he indulged constantly in what one enlightened authority was now calling "self-pleasuring." Edward had been pleased to discover the term. He was born too late in the century, in 1940, to believe that he was abusing his body, that his sight would be impaired, or that God watched with stern incredulity as he bent daily to the task. Or even that everyone knew about it from his pale and inward look. All the same, a certain ill-defined disgrace hung over his efforts, a sense of failure and waste, and, of course, loneliness. And pleasure was really an incidental benefit. The goal was release—from the urgent, thought-confining desire for what could not be immediately had. How extraordinary it was, that a self-made spoonful, leaping clear of his body, should instantly free his mind to confront afresh Nelson's decisiveness at Aboukir Bay.

Edward's single most important contribution to the wedding arrangements had been to refrain, for more than a week. Not since he was twelve had he been so entirely chaste with himself. He wanted to be in top form for his bride. It was not easy, especially at night in bed, or in the mornings as he woke, or in the

long afternoons, or in the hours before lunch, or after supper, in the hours before bed. Now here they were at last, married and alone. Why did he not rise from his roast, cover her in kisses, and lead her toward the fourposter next door? It was not so simple. He had a fairly long history of engaging with Florence's shyness. He had come to respect it, even revere it, mistaking it for a form of coyness, a conventional veil for a richly sexual nature—in all, part of the intricate depth of her personality, and proof of her quality. He convinced himself that he preferred her this way. He did not spell it out for himself, but her reticence suited his own ignorance and lack of confidence; a more sensual and demanding woman, a *wild* woman, might have terrified him.

Their courtship had been a pavane, a stately unfolding, bound by protocols never agreed upon or voiced but generally observed. Nothing was ever discussed—nor did they feel the lack of intimate talk. These were matters beyond words, beyond definition. The language and practice of therapy, the currency of feelings diligently shared, mutually analyzed, were not yet in general circulation. While one heard of wealthier people going in for psychoanalysis, it was not customary to regard oneself in everyday terms as an enigma, as an exercise in narrative history, or as a problem waiting to be solved.

Between Edward and Florence nothing happened quickly. Important advances, permissions wordlessly granted to extend what he was allowed to see or caress, were attained only gradually. The day in October when he first saw her naked breasts long preceded the day when he could touch them—December 19th. He kissed them in February, though not her nipples, which he had grazed with his lips once, in May. She allowed herself to advance across his body with even greater caution. Sudden moves or radical suggestions on his part could undo months of good work. The evening in the cinema, at a showing of "A Taste

of Honey," when he had taken her hand and plunged it between his legs set the process back weeks. She became . . . not frosty, or even cool—that was never her way—but imperceptibly remote, perhaps disappointed, or even faintly betrayed. She retreated from him somehow without letting him ever feel in doubt about her love. Then, at last, they were back on course: when they were alone one Saturday afternoon in late March, with the rain falling heavily outside the windows of the disorderly sitting room of his parents' tiny house in the Chiltern Hills, she let her hand rest briefly on, or near, his penis. For less than fifteen seconds, in rising hope and ecstasy, he felt her through two layers of fabric. As soon as she pulled away he knew he could bear it no more. He asked her to marry him.

He could not have known what it cost her to put a hand—it was the back of her hand—in such a place. She loved him, she wanted to please him, but she had to overcome considerable distaste. It was an honest attempt—she may have been clever, but she was without guile. She kept that hand in place for as long as she could, until she felt a stirring and hardening beneath the gray flannel of his trousers. She experienced a living thing, quite separate from her Edward—and she recoiled. Then he blurted out his proposal, and in the rush of emotion, the delight and hilarity and relief, the sudden embrace, she momentarily forgot her shock. And he was so astonished by his own decisiveness, as well as mentally cramped by unresolved desire, that he could have had little idea of the contradiction she began to live with from that day on, the secret affair between disgust and joy.

They were alone then, and theoretically free to do whatever they wanted, but they went on eating the dinner they had no appetite for. Florence set down her knife and reached for Edward's hand and squeezed. From downstairs they heard the wireless, and the chimes of Big Ben that preceded the ten-o'clock news. Along this stretch of coast, television reception was poor because of the hills just inland. The older guests would be down there in the sitting room, taking the measure of the world with their nightcaps—the hotel had a good selection of single



malts—and some of the men would be filling their pipes for one last time that day. Gathering around the wireless for the main bulletin was a wartime habit they would never break. Edward and Florence heard the muffled headlines and caught the name of the Prime Minister, and then, a minute or two later, his familiar voice, raised in a speech. Harold Macmillan had been addressing a conference about the arms race and the need for a test-ban treaty. Who could disagree that it was folly to go on testing H-bombs in the atmosphere and irradiating the whole planet? But no one under thirty—certainly not Edward and Florence—believed that a British Prime Minister held much sway in global affairs. Every year the Empire shrank as another few countries took their rightful independence. Now there was almost nothing left, and the world belonged to the Americans and the Russians. Britain, England, was a minor power—saying this gave a certain blasphemous pleasure. Downstairs, of course, they took a different view. Anyone over forty would have fought, or suffered, in the war and known death on an unusual scale, and would not have been able to believe that a drift into irrelevance was the reward for all the sacrifice.

Edward and Florence would be voting for the first time in the next general election and were keen on the idea of a Labour landslide as great as the famous victory of 1945. In a year or two, the older generation who still dreamed of the Empire must surely give way to politicians like Gaitskell, Wilson, Crosland—new men with a vision of a modern country where there was equality and things actually got done. If America could have an exuberant and handsome President Kennedy, then Britain could have something similar—at least in spirit, for there was no one quite so glamorous in the Labour Party. The blimps, still fighting the last war, still nostalgic for its discipline and privations—their time was up. Edward and Florence's shared sense that one day soon the country would be transformed for the better, that youthful energies were pushing to escape, like steam under pressure, merged with the excitement of their own adventure together. The sixties was their first decade of adult life, and it surely belonged to them. The pipe-smokers downstairs in their silver-



buttoned blazers, with their double measures of Caol Ila, with their memories of campaigns in North Africa and Normandy, and their cultivated remnants of Army slang—they could have no claim on the future. Time, gentlemen, please!

The rising mist continued to unveil the nearby trees, the bare cliffs behind them, and portions of a silver sea, while the smooth evening air poured in around the table, and they continued their pretense of eating, trapped in the moment by their private anxieties. Florence was merely moving the food around her plate. Edward ate only token morsels of potato, which he carved with the edge of his fork. They listened helplessly to the second item of news, aware of how dull it was of them to be linking their attention to that of the guests downstairs. Their wedding night, and they had nothing to say. The words rose indistinctly from under their feet, but they made out "Berlin" and knew instantly that this was the story that had lately captivated everyone: an escape from the Communist east to

the west of the city by way of a commandeered steamship on the Spree, the refugees cowering by the wheelhouse to dodge the bullets of the East German guards. Florence and Edward listened to that, and then, intolerably, the third item as well, the concluding session of an Islamic conference in Baghdad.

Bound to world events by their own stupidity! It could not go on. It was time to act. Edward loosened his tie and firmly set down his knife and fork in parallel on his plate.

"We could go downstairs and listen properly."

He hoped he was being humorous, directing his sarcasm against them both, but his words emerged with surprising ferocity, and Florence blushed. She thought he was criticizing her for preferring the wireless to him, and before he could soften or lighten his remark she said hurriedly, "Or we could go and lie on the bed," and nervously swiped an invisible hair from her forehead. To demonstrate how wrong he was, she was pro-



"I couldn't put it down."

posing what she knew he most wanted and she dreaded. She really would have been happier, or less unhappy, to go down to the lounge and pass the time in quiet conversation with the matrons on the floral-patterned sofas while their men leaned seriously into the news, into the gale of history. Anything but this.

Her husband was smiling and standing and ceremoniously extending his hand across the table. He, too, was a little pink about the face. His napkin clung to his waist for a moment, hanging absurdly, like a loincloth, and then wafted to the floor in slow motion. There was nothing she could do, beyond fainting, and she was hopeless at acting. She stood and took his hand, certain that her own returning smile was rigidly unconvincing. It would not have helped her to know that Edward in his dreamlike state had never seen her looking lovelier. Something about her arms, he remembered thinking later, slender and vulnerable, and soon to be looped adoringly around his neck. And her beautiful dark eyes, bright with undeniable passion, and the faint trembling in her lower lip, which even now she wetted with her tongue.

With his free hand he tried to gather up the wine bottle and the half-full

glasses, but that was too difficult and distracting; the glasses bulged against each other, causing the stems to cross in his hands and the wine to spill. Instead he seized the bottle alone by the neck. Even in his exalted, jittery condition, he thought he understood her customary reticence. All the more cause for joy, then, that they were facing this momentous occasion, this dividing line of experience, together. And the thrilling fact remained that it was Florence who had suggested lying on the bed. Her changed status had set her free. Still holding her hand, he came around the table and drew near to kiss her. Believing it was vulgar to do so holding a wine bottle, he set it down again.

"You're very beautiful," he whispered.

She made herself remember how much she loved this man. He was kind, sensitive; he loved her and could do her no harm. She shrugged herself deeper into his embrace, close against his chest, and inhaled his familiar scent, which had a woody quality and was reassuring.

"I'm so happy here with you."

"I'm so happy, too," she said quietly.

When they kissed she immediately felt his tongue, tensed and strong, pushing past her teeth, like some bully should-

dering his way into a room. Entering her. Her own tongue folded and recoiled in automatic distaste, making even more space for Edward. He knew well enough that she did not like this kind of kissing, and he had never before been so assertive. With his lips clamped firmly onto hers, he probed the fleshy floor of her mouth, then moved around inside the teeth of her lower jaw to the empty place where three years ago a wisdom tooth had crookedly grown until removed under general anesthesia. This cavity was where her own tongue usually strayed when she was lost in thought. By association, it was more like an idea than a location, a private, imaginary place rather than a hollow in her gum, and it seemed peculiar to her that another tongue should be able to go there, too. It was the hard tapering tip of this alien muscle, quiveringly alive, that repelled her. His left hand was pressed flat above her shoulder blades, just below her neck, levering her head against his. Her claustrophobia and breathlessness grew, even as she became more determined that she could not bear to offend him. He was under her tongue, pushing it up against the roof of her mouth, then on top, pushing down, then sliding smoothly along the sides and around, as though he thought he could tie a simple up-and-over knot. He wanted to engage her tongue in some activity of its own, coax it into a hideous mute duet, but she could only concentrate on not struggling, not gagging, not panicking. If she was sick into his mouth, was one wild thought, their marriage would be instantly over, and she would have to go home and explain herself to her parents. She understood perfectly that this business with tongues, this penetration, was a small-scale enactment, a ritual tableau vivant of what was still to come, like the prologue of an old play that tells you everything that must happen.

As she stood waiting for this particular moment to pass, her hands, for form's sake, resting on Edward's hips, Florence realized that she had stumbled across an empty truth, self-evident enough in retrospect, as primal and timeworn as Danegeld or droit du seigneur, and almost too elemental to define: in deciding to be married, she had agreed to exactly this. She had agreed that it was right to do this, and to have this done to

her. When she and Edward and their parents had filed back to the gloomy sacristy after the ceremony to sign the register, it was this that they had put their names to, and all the rest—the supposed maturity, the confetti and cake—was a polite distraction. And if she didn't like it she alone was responsible, for all her choices over the past year were always narrowing to this, and it was all her fault, and now she really did think that she was going to be sick.

When he heard her moan, Edward knew that his happiness was almost complete. He had the impression of delightful weightlessness, of standing several inches clear of the ground, so that he towered pleasingly over her. There was pain-pleasure in the way his heart seemed to rise to thud at the base of his throat. He was thrilled by the light touch of her hands, not so very far from his groin, and by the compliance of her lovely body enfolded in his arms, and the passionate sound of her breathing rapidly through her nostrils. It brought him to a point of unfamiliar ecstasy, cold and sharp, just below the ribs, the way her tongue gently enveloped his as he pushed against it. Perhaps he could persuade her one day soon—perhaps this evening, and she might need no persuading—to take his cock into her soft and beautiful mouth. But that was a thought he needed to scramble away from as fast as he could, for he was in real danger of arriving too soon. He could feel it already beginning, tipping him toward disgrace. Just in time, he thought of the news, of the face of the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, tall, stooping, walruslike, a war hero, an old buffer—he was everything that was not sex, and ideal for the purpose. Some cursed him for having given away the Empire, but there was no choice, really, with these winds of change blowing through Africa. No one would have taken that same message from a Labour man. And he had sacked a third of his Cabinet in the “night of the long knives.” That took some nerve. “MAC THE KNIFE” was one headline; “MACBETH!” was another. Serious-minded people complained that he was burying the nation in an avalanche of TVs, cars, supermarkets, and other junk. He let the people have what they wanted. Bread and circuses. A new nation, and now he

wanted us to join Europe, and who could say for sure that he was wrong?

Steadied at last. Edward's thoughts dissolved, and he became once more his tongue, the very tip of it, at the same moment that Florence decided that she could take no more. She felt pinioned and smothered, she was suffocating, she was nauseated. And she could hear a sound, rising steadily, not in steps like a scale but in a slow glissando, not quite a violin or a voice but somewhere in between, rising and rising unbearably, without ever leaving the audible range, a violin-voice that was just on the edge of making sense, telling her something urgent in sibilants and vowels more primitive than words. It might have been inside the room or out in the corridor, or only in her ears, like a tinnitus. She might even have been making the noise herself. She did not care—she had to get out.

She jerked her head away and pushed free of his arms. Even as he stared at her in surprise, still openmouthed, a question beginning to form in his expression, she seized his hand and led him toward the bed. It was perverse of her, insane even, when what she wanted was to run from the room, across the gardens and down the lane, onto the beach to sit alone. Even one minute alone would have helped. But her sense of duty was

painfully strong and she could not resist it. She could not bear to let Edward down. And she was convinced that she was completely in the wrong. If the entire wedding ensemble of guests and close family had been somehow crammed invisibly into the room to watch, these ghosts would all have sided with Edward and his reasonable desires. They would have assumed that there was something wrong with her, and they would have been right.

She also knew that her behavior was pitiful. To survive, to escape one hideous moment, she had to raise the stakes and commit herself to the next, giving the unhelpful impression that she longed for it herself. The final act could not be endlessly deferred. The moment was approaching, just as she was foolishly moving toward it. She was trapped in a game whose rules she could not question. She could not escape the logic that had her leading, or towing, Edward across the room toward the open door of the bedroom, and the narrow fourposter bed and its smooth white cover. She had no idea what she would do when they were there, but at least that rising sound had ceased, and, in the few seconds it would take to arrive, her mouth and tongue were her own, and she could breathe and try to take possession of herself. ♦



“You must be the nonentity Grace is always moaning about.”