

You wouldn't think that there were still women who could be ruined. Perhaps there aren't any more, but back then, in that university town by the sea, there were. It was quite an old-fashioned place. Luke was quite old-fashioned too. Cast himself as a latter day Dorian or Valmont, sinned the old sins.

He knew how I felt about him, of course. By then I'd stopped even trying to conceal it.

We were sitting on the windowsill of the pool room in the Union. I heard a shriek and traced his gaze to a girl who was celebrating her lucky, winning shot. She brandished her cue in the air, shook hands with her opponent, clinked pint glasses with her friends, all without quite losing her self-consciousness.

Her?

Yes, she'll do, he said.

He gave me twenty pence to stake his claim. A stake which could be raised; he'd honed his technique during his teenage years, his apprenticeship. Better she'd lost, kept quiet. Her taste for games was unlikely to match his.

I'll play you, I said, laying his money on the table. If you want.

You're on, she said.

I have to warn you, I'm not very good.

How about doubles then? You and your pal against me and Diane.

Perfect, I said, smiling at Diane as I went to select a cue.

I'd been striving to develop an epicene quality, in keeping with my tender years. And it was working, to an extent: women found it non-threatening, attractive even, if I'm not flattering myself too much. I indulged it because finally I could. Unlike so many of my peers I was emphatically working class. And so was Luke.

But you're wondering about the girl I was talking to, while he went to the bar to buy tequila all round. Her name was Lucy (short for Lucinda, though she tried not to let on). I recognised her from one of my philosophy options. She always came in late, bells jingling around the ankles of her 14-hole Doc Martens, and sat at the front of the old wooden-benched lecture room, picking her cuticles and trying to bring everything back to Nietzsche even when we'd moved on to Heidegger.

Luke's timing was good. There was still an hour's drinking to be done, but her friends were fading fast, apart from loyal Diane, whose heavily mascaraed eyes, slightly magnified, peered through her specs at me with mistrust. I sensed a little crush on Lucy, who remained high and bright and on a roll. Going by the white-girl braids in her hair, the five silver hoops in each ear, the barbell through her right eyebrow, she was rebelling within her confines. That was the fashion back then; I understand that generic honey blonde and an English-rose complexion are more aspirational now. For him it was enough to know that she'd graduate, swap tie-dye for cashmere, let her piercings heal.

I'm Richard, I said.

Lucy.

Yes, I know. Philosophy 2a.

I thought I recognised you from somewhere. Who's your friend?

That's what everyone asked, I thought, as I watched Luke weave towards us, a brace of shot glasses in each hand. Who's your friend?

It was a done deal. Stephie would get off the train in Inverness; he'd collect her at the station. Richard swivelled his chair away from his desk and towards the window. The small ferry was pootling towards the islands with its cargo of day-trippers. At first he'd been surprised to see the people carriers parked at the jetty. All those middle class families posed for photographs by the Aquila Maris. The contents of purses checked and measured into helpings of tea, scones and souvenir stamps from the only part of the country still to require special postage to reach the mainland. In a few hours time the visitors would wobble from the gangplank, ready to be absorbed by their designed-for-safety vehicles. They'd drive along the single track roads, melting into their campsites and caravan parks, leaving the area as peaceful as if their presence had been a mirage.

Peaceful, yes, Richard had felt peaceful too, but now the arrival of his little sister was niggling in his consciousness. 4.30pm tomorrow. He closed his email and looked at the screen for a few more moments before deciding that he felt too unsettled to do more work. He'd get the spare room ready, go back to it later. It was only as his computer sang out its goodbye that he realised that he had no idea how long Stephie intended to stay.

In the supermarket the next day, he selected instant meals and microwave snacks, salads and pulses, rye bread and Mother's Pride. Would she want to gorge herself on junk food or might she be observing some celebrity-endorsed food fad? He skimmed the shelves for products labelled organic and low GI. Was she still a vegetarian? (Had she ever been a vegetarian?) Chocolate. All girls liked chocolate, surely. He even browsed the DVDs, hesitated over a popular horror (his house was isolated, it might freak her out), before finally grabbing a teen flick, a costume drama and the second series of a comedy show he'd never watched but whose catchphrases he recognised when they were regurgitated in the newspapers. At the toiletries aisle he picked up the most expensive bubble bath they had; it was possible that Stephie was recovering from some emotional trauma and would want to spend hours in the bathroom.

And now here he was, shivering by the ticket machines in a T-shirt chosen to announce 'just because I live up north doesn't mean I can't be edgy', watching the jam of people brandishing railcards and jostling each other with rucksacks as they squeezed past the two ticket inspectors. A flicker of eye contact with a tourist, and then Richard looked away. He felt himself blending into the background, hoped that Stephie would notice him the instant she arrived. The mystery wasn't what she ate or liked to watch on television, but why she wanted to come to stay at all. And indeed why her parents (who were, he had to remind himself, his parents too) considered it such a good idea.

'She's got a lot of studying to catch up on,' his mother had typed, ominously. 'She could do with less distractions.'

And so what had been mooted - as far as he was concerned - as a vague plan had taken firm shape despite his protestation that he had a deadline looming and would not be on hand to babysit.

'She's far too old for a babysitter,' the admonitory reply had blinked back in the open email window. 'She can amuse herself.'

When he was Stephie's age he'd certainly been able to amuse himself. He often wondered what he'd do if he could go back and relive that period, usually coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that he'd do exactly the same again. Which didn't necessarily make him a textbook guardian for an impressionable youngster.

'Hey there.' Stephie was standing in front of him, twisting one foot behind the other.

'Hey, hello! Here, let me,' he indicated her wheelee case, which she manoeuvred towards him. It was heavy and swollen, the zip strained, and once again Richard worried how long she was planning to stay. But then women always packed more, didn't they? Make up and so on. It might be an overnight bag, for all he knew.

'When did you go blonde?' he asked, noticing that what he remembered as shoulder length brown hair had been replaced by a crop of mixed highlights.

'Ages ago,' she said, wriggling into the straps of the small day sack she'd been swinging from one arm.

'Right. Well, it's nice. I like it.'

'Got it done in Ayr,' she said. 'Didn't trust the blue rinse merchants at home.'

'Don't blame you. Anyway, car's out here,' Richard said. 'How's your journey been? Hellish?'

'All right,' she shrugged. 'I slept.'

'Well, we've got a bit further to go,' he said, trying not to look at the dark smudges beneath her eyes. Outside the sky had drawn closer and greyer, and the people dressed in vests and shorts looked foolish and out of place. Richard unlocked the door of his battered Ford.

'Nice car. Thought you earned a packet now?'

'Does the job. Nobody to show off to around here anyway.'

'And me bringing all my glad rags just in case.'

'I've explained what it's like.'

'Yeah but none of us have ever seen it, have we? We've never been.'

'I sent jpegs.'

'A jpeg isn't an invitation to dinner.'

Richard pulled up at the give way at the car park exit, shot a glance at his sister. She was looking straight ahead. Seeing rain spots on the windscreen he switched the wipers on, used the movement as an excuse to reach out and grasp her arm.

'You're here now.'

'I'm honoured,' she said. 'So, how much further is a bit?'

'About three hours?'

'Okay.' She turned in her seat and withdrew a pair of sunglasses from the pocket of her jeans. 'I'm going to grab another forty winks. Wake me when it gets scenic.'

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There must, I suppose, have been a point of no return. It would be indulgent to claim it was the first moment I laid eyes on Luke, when it's enough just to say that I met him on the day I left home. I got the bus, which was, as everyone insisted with a frequency that soon became irksome, a long road for a short cut. My parents drove me to the terminus and we said our farewells, much to the interest of the local jakey, who seemed to believe I was going off to war. He broke into a garbled chorus of 'Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye', swaying his can of Special Brew in encouragement as we loaded my suitcase and rucksack into the side of the coach. Must've been all the time he spent propped on the bench by the war memorial, or perhaps he'd spotted me at work one Saturday, assumed the white gravestones I was scrubbing were those of my comrades in arms. I twisted round in the back seat to see the cemetery as we left, cricking my neck until I caught sight of the headstones beyond the high wall. Although I was desperate to go, I couldn't help looking back.

It was a tedious bus ride from the 'Leck to Drumrigg, from Drumrigg to Glasgow, from there across to the coast and on. I almost wished I'd allowed my parents to drive me rather than palming them off with promises of mid-term visits. But as the route became less familiar, the boredom was leavened by that sense of anticipation that starts as a delicate throb in your chest then flutters through your stomach, brightening your eyes and refining your senses. Something's coming, I thought, something is on its way. And indeed it was. As the coach grew warmer, an unmistakable smell emerged. Piquant, as though a sloppy puddle of spew lay rank and undiscovered under a seat not far from my own. I felt nauseated, obviously, but worse than that I started to imagine the odour permeating my clothes and skin. A startling flash-forward saw me arriving at university and earning the nickname of Boakboy, which would stick to me like, well, sick, until graduation. Which seemed a very, very long way in the future.

No, this was my New Start, as the posters outside the Job Centre liked to trumpet, and I'd have sold my granny (her mind was beginning to drift, she'd scarcely have noticed) rather than let anything smear its lustre. Boakboy may have been sheer paranoid fantasy, but by the time I reached the city I thought, sod this for a game of soldiers. Gathering my backpack and unwieldy case (veteran of family holidays and that trip to Spain 'before you two were born'), I dragged myself to railway station, where I blew a fair portion of the emergency twenty quid my mother had sneaked into my hand on the train fare. And so I ended up on the same Scotrail express service that Luke joined at Edinburgh Waverley. It must have been fate that brought us together, chance was never so precise.

There were plenty of seats, but loose-limbed and smoky he chose one across the table from me. When he stretched to squash his rucksack into the luggage rack his t-shirt rose, allowing me to glimpse a dark curl of hair above the waistband of his jeans, the very tip of an appendectomy scar. I allowed myself the tiniest of fantasies, of unbuttoning his fly right there and then. As I'd put on my new clothes ready for the journey I'd felt that I was slipping into a new skin, becoming truly me. Sexual experimentation at universities was rife, or so they always said, but my gayness was no untested hypothesis. It was ready to be published and, with any luck, peer-reviewed.

That said, if sitting opposite a pretty boy on the train was my first test of valour, I flunked it. A little half smile was all I managed before inclining my head back towards my book. Excitement prevented me from reading properly. Not at his proximity - it wasn't love at first sight - but at what lay ahead. Although I turned the pages at regular intervals my thoughts hardly touched whatever it was I was reading. One of my course texts perhaps; Sartre or Kierkegaard, a volume more likely chosen for show than enthusiasm. I felt as if an aura of energy was crackling around me, that surely he'd detect.

Are you going to university, by any chance?

I rehearsed the line in my mind, then convinced myself that it was too gauche to ask and looked out the window instead. The grass was the same shade of green as at home, the hills had the same low curves. The ripening fields and scattered sheep were familiar too, though I'd never made this journey before. We sped by a converted mill, a disused viaduct, four clipped thoroughbreds wearing rugs despite the mild weather, and each of these seemed like a sight I'd see going to Ayr to spend my birthday money. Then through the trees which screened it from the track I caught a swift glimpse of a derelict mansion house, roofless, its grey stone façade tainted by fire.

Imagine that burning, he said.

With his words out there already, hanging in the air between us, it wasn't long before I forced out my own line.

Are you going to university, by any chance?

Brave of me to speak, chicken to do so in my deepest, straightest voice. It was as if I'd suddenly got stuck in a lift with Coco from the 6<sup>th</sup> year (on whom I'd had a stupendous crush), though I couldn't think of anywhere in Leckie that had a lift for us to get stuck in, unless it was a Stannah Stair Lift, and that wasn't exactly what I had in mind. I wanted to impress this person who had sat down opposite me, to coax him into liking me. Revealing too much too soon seemed an unnecessary risk.

Yes, he said. Yes I am.

There was no knowing when Stephie might get up. The drive had taken longer than usual. Long enough to try her patience, Richard had thought, as they shared a monosyllabic dinner before watching television for an hour before bed. Ah well, a good night's sleep and all that. He left the coffee things out on the worktop in the kitchen, along with a note, then slipped outside without locking the door behind him, imagining only belatedly Stephie's anxiety if she discovered she'd been left sleeping in an open house. He ran up the hill and then down the curving road towards the old croft jetty. Low lumps in the ground nearby delineated where rooms and byre had been, mossy stones pushing through the grass like benign wisdom teeth. A gnarled tree, still clinging to a sprinkle of spring blossom, edged its crooked way out of what might once have been the hearth.

Reaching the jetty Richard slowed to a walk, following it out over the water. It was narrow and fragile-looking compared to the new ferry dock, better avoided if the wind was high or the waves likely to slop over and catch your feet from under you. On a calm morning though, like this, the smell of salt and seaweed seemed almost unbearable in its freshness. It wasn't just a question of clearing your head, or so Richard felt, but more a sense that the world itself had been cleansed and rested overnight and was now hopeful about the day ahead. He used a rusting bollard for his leg stretches, listening to the waves brushing against the plinths below and thinking of Stephie sound asleep. How late would he have stayed in bed when he was her age? Midday, later?

His memory was, he thought, like a series of rooms. Rooms with white walls and cornices, smooth dusty floors and scuffed skirting. Each one empty, light filtering through blemished windows and catching on motes of dust in the stale air. And yet these rooms contained his life; stories written on the plaster in lemon juice, waiting for heat to flow through them, for flames to lick at the picture rails and expose images as charred as the flecks of paper and coal in the grates. He could walk through these rooms, seizing the handles and pushing open the heavy doors, until he reached the final one, where a speckled mirror hung above a high marble fireplace, and if he paused and looked beyond his reflection for long enough Richard knew he would see a chaise-longue with chipped legs and scraps of horsehair leaking from the tattered upholstery. And beyond that, life rippling through the other rooms, illuminating them and making them vivid once more.

As it happened, Stephie rose long before midday, though by the time she was washed and breakfasted and hair-straightened it didn't seem so. Richard watched as she dabbed a spot of blush on the apple of each cheek, then quickly massaged it in. He'd been the same, when he first arrived in the village. Not with blusher admittedly, but changing his top to go out, running his fingers through his hair, checking there were no coffee stains on his trousers. He wasn't sure how long it had taken him to realise that there were no handsome strangers to bump into, no Mermen singing at the water's edge. Nor when he'd started to feel relieved rather than disappointed.

'Will you be okay walking in those shoes?' he asked, nodding towards Stephie's thong sandals, the splay of her turquoise varnished toenails.

'Yeah.'

'It's not as close as it seems in the car.'

'For god's sake Richard. They're dead comfy.'

He supposed his hiking boots weren't strictly necessary for a stroll down the road to the village. Perhaps he'd been too rigorous in adopting the uniform of the countryside; he underwent a makeover whenever he had to attend a meeting in Dundee or London. He was expected to be a geek, sure, but a geek with quirky Japanese accessories and trousers that didn't amount to a social faux-pas. Amazing what a whisper of hair wax could do, a hint of a fin, demi-quiff or side shed enough to reassure his colleagues that although he lived somewhere 'simply hilarious' (to quote Rupe, his commissioning editor), he was in fact capable of tapping in to the aspirations of 'the socially-engaged but seventies-nostalgic post-PC sofa-adventurous consumer' (that from DaCapo's branding strategy consultants).

Richard led Stephie down the hill and past the shingle beach, taking a detour along the new jetty so that he could point to the ferry pulling out of the harbour on Tanera Mhor.

'Not much of a village,' Stephie said, as they got closer.

‘Enough people for two pubs. Garage, shop, village hall, church. Public toilets with showers, no less.’

‘I’d settle for mobile phone reception.’

‘There is down here. I should’ve said that you might have to go outside the house to speak.’

‘Texts?’

‘Maybe in the front room. If you’re lucky.’

‘Okay,’ she said, then: ‘It’s pretty here.’

‘Pretty in the sunshine. Come on, there’s a good view from up by the war memorial.’

Stephie made Richard pose for a photo with the sea behind him – ‘proof for Mum and Dad that you haven’t had a sex change or something’ – then stood, shifting her weight from one foot to the other and reading the names on the memorial. Richard stooped to straighten the faded poppy wreath from the previous Remembrance Day. After a while, she said, ‘I wouldn’t have thought so many people lived here.’

‘There’s surrounding settlements too, and the more isolated crofts. But this,’ he waved his hand at the primary school behind him, ‘is the biggest place for quite a way.’

‘But still.’

‘Makes you wonder who was left, doesn’t it?’

‘How they managed to produce enough men to be killed in the next war,’ Stephie said, pointing at the shorter list of casualties for 1939-1945. ‘Maybe someone from the Ministry came round and impregnated all the women.’

‘Don’t be grotesque.’

Stephie stuck her tongue out at him. ‘Come to think of it, some of the people here do look pretty similar.’

‘Stop it. It isn’t easy living here, you know.’

‘How do you manage,’ she asked, but her words got caught up in the wind behind Richard, allowing him to ignore them as he marched across the road and back towards the shop. He heard the flat patter of her sandals as she ran to catch up with him.

They bought ice lollies and walked back along to the shingle beach. The sun was brighter now, highlighting the peaty hills and glinting off the water. Beyond the headland the islands glowed green. Stephie picked her way across the bigger stones to a huge wooden beam, weathered over the years.

‘It’s more colourful in the sunshine,’ she said, unbuckling her sandals and wiggling her toes in the breeze. ‘Still bleak though. Kind of unforgiving.’

‘Not when you get used to it. Have you got blisters?’

She examined between her toes. ‘Not yet. But I might do by the time we get home. Unless I can go barefoot.’

‘I wouldn’t recommend it. Too rough, and besides, the cute little baa lambs tend to shit all over the road.’

They watched as a Citroen and then a Renault skirted the bay and drove up the hill, bumping over the bridge then flashing out of sight behind a house. The cars reappeared a second later, sending the gulls flapping into the air as they crawled along the jetty to where the ferry was now docked and waiting for its afternoon seal-spotting cruise. The Citroen disgorged four children with blonde floppy hair, the Renault three more with brown curls. Both sets of parents quickly began the process of stuffing their offspring into brightly coloured sweaters. That done, they were all herded onto the Aquila Maris by old Rab, who would amuse them by leaping around the deck barefoot and shouting about sharks. Just as Richard was trying to formulate an anecdote about local characters, in case the silence between he and Stephie wasn’t entirely comfortable, she said:

‘Remember the caravan at Maidens?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘That time you got stung by a jellyfish on the beach and Mum said someone should pee on it.’

‘Oh god,’ he said. ‘I screamed my head off at that, didn’t I? More than at being stung in the first place.’

‘But we went to the doctor instead.’

He nodded. ‘I guess it’s cheaper to fly to Spain or the Canaries now.’

‘Yeah, and it’s probably sunnier there than it ever was in Maidens.’

‘That’s funny. I remember it as sunny all the time. No, that’s not true. There was always that one day when it rained and we all had to stay squashed in the caravan until there was a big row.’

Stephie laughed, concentrating for a second on getting the final melting piece of lolly into her mouth without losing any. ‘And then Dad would take Jojo for a walk,’ she said.

‘So that we’d all end up crammed into a caravan that smelt of wet dog.’

The little ferry parped its horn as it cast off. They watched as it arced out into the bay and disappeared beyond the headland.

‘Richard?’

‘Uhuh?’

‘Why did you come here?’

He sighed. ‘I wanted a change.’

‘It ain’t exactly Vegas.’

‘I needed a place where I could really concentrate on my work. The first couple of commissions were lucky breaks. Following them up was crucial.’

Stephie wedged her lollipop stick into a crevasse where the beam had split around a rusting rivet. ‘I get that, but why here?’

‘I got a good deal on a long term lease for the house. And it’s worked out. I got the idea for this project here, as it happens.’

‘So what is it then, Virtual Village? I guess lo-fi is in.’

‘It’s a war game,’ Richard said.

‘What, like dungeons and dragons, elves and goblins – what was that thing that you used to collect the figures from?’

‘Warhammer,’ Richard said, with a slight shudder of embarrassment, although he knew a box of little painted figurines was still safe in the attic back in Leckie. ‘No, this is real, the Great War. Trenches. Going over the top, that kind of thing. Working title’s *Somme*, but that doesn’t really fit as the scope’s wider. And marketing will probably demand that we change it to World War X-Treme or something ludicrous.’

‘And I suppose you don’t have to be on the side of good and right.’

Richard hesitated. ‘It’s a non-linear environment. You can choose your character and storyline. That’s the way it works.’

‘I see.’

‘It’s a big project. They’ve even outsourced the German characters to a studio in Hamburg.’

‘Lovely. So all the neo-Nazis can get into it.’

‘It’s the first world war, you eejit. Didn’t you learn anything at school?’

‘Not in history. Mrs McGee was off all of the time. Stress, apparently.’

‘She was the same when I was there. Except it was called flu then.’

Richard reached for a pebble and started circling it between his palms, increasing the pressure to see if the sandy grey surface would rub off to reveal smooth black stone underneath. Stephie looked out to sea, then behind her to the single track road that wove between the mountains and after twenty miles or so joined the B road south.

‘It’s so far away,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘I thought you liked towns.’

‘We grew up in a town, remember?’

‘You went away to university in a town.’

‘It was in the countryside. By the sea.’ He got up, stretched his arms over his head, still holding the pebble. ‘We’ll have to move, I’m afraid. I’ve got a few things to get ready for a meeting later.’

‘A meeting?’

‘A virtual meeting.’

‘Right.’

Stephie grabbed her sandals, then hopped alongside him over the stones onto the springy turf. A battered old jeep tooted at them as it rounded the bend and rumbled over the small bridge. Richard raised one hand in salutation.

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