

I

‘You shouldn’t drink so much.’ George’s whisper hissed into the heat of the summer night as they walked home along the silent pavement.

‘I didn’t have more than three glasses,’ Jeanie protested. ‘I’m certainly not drunk.’

She unlocked the door and made her way through to the kitchen. It was hot, so hot, even at ten-thirty at night. She threw the keys and her bag on the table and went to open the French windows on to the terrace.

‘It’s bloody embarrassing, you get so strident and loud,’ George went on as if she hadn’t spoken. ‘As if anyone’s interested in vitamin trials. If you hadn’t been so drunk you would’ve seen the man was bored out of his brain.’

Jeanie looked at her husband, stung by the venom in his voice. He’d been uncharacteristically tense all evening, snappish even before they’d left for Maria and Tony’s. Then,

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when they'd hardly finished coffee, George had jumped up and said they had to go, some feeble excuse of an early meeting she knew he didn't have.

'I wasn't drunk, George. I'm *not* drunk. He was the one who kept asking questions,' she told him quietly.

George picked up the keys she'd flung on the table and went to hang them on the rack of hooks by the doorway. Above each hook was a label in George's careful, even script: George-H, Jeanie-H, George-C, Jeanie-C, Spare H, Spare C, to denote house and car keys for them both.

'Let's have a nightcap outside. It's too hot to sleep.' She checked her husband's face to see if she were yet forgiven, but his eyes were tense behind the heavy tortoiseshell glasses.

'I'm sure he thought you were flirting,' George persisted, staring pointedly at his wife.

'Oh, for heaven's sake.' Jeanie felt the breath short in her chest and looked away from him, a blush flooding her cheeks. Not a blush of guilt – the man had been weedy and dried up with discoloured teeth: nice enough, but hardly a sex object – but of anxiety. She hated confrontation. Brought up in a dank Norfolk vicarage, she had watched her mother swallow the brusque, domineering dictats issued by her father, never questioning his right to abuse her in this way. Jeanie had lived in fear of him, but she remembered willing her mother on, hoping that just for once she would finally explode, make a stand against his bullying, and vowing that she would never let herself be treated in that way. Mild-mannered George, she believed, was nothing like her father.

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George raised his eyebrows. 'You're blushing.'

She took a deep breath. 'Come on, pour us an Armagnac and let's sit outside and cool off.' She heard the wheedling tone in her voice and hated herself for it. 'You saw him,' she added weakly, and moved towards the terrace. She felt the adrenaline twitching in her body, and was suddenly just tired.

'I think I'll go up,' he said, but he made no move to go; just stood, his tall, gangly frame sagging and rooted, in the middle of the kitchen. He seemed miles away, the stupid tension about the dinner party obviously forgotten.

'George . . . what is it . . . what's wrong?' She went over to him and looked up into his face. Shocked, she saw a heavy, blank desperation in his brown eyes that she'd never seen before. 'George?'

For a second he held her gaze, frozen. He seemed about to speak, but instead turned abruptly away.

'Did something happen today?'

'I'm fine . . . fine.' He cut across her question. 'Nothing happened. What could happen?' She watched his face twitch and pull distractedly, as if he were trying to change his expression, then he headed for the stairs. 'Are you coming?' he muttered as he left.

The bedroom was airless and stuffy from the day's heat, despite the sash window thrown wide. George turned to her as she sank into bed, and drew his long finger across her cheek, her mouth, then brought his hand down slowly over

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her body in a determined gesture of desire. She didn't want him, but there was something single-minded about his caress that was hard to refuse. This was not lovemaking, however, nor did it seem to be anything to do with her; she could have been anyone. In fact she had the odd feeling that neither of them was there, naked on that hot, damp sheet. It felt like a remote access engagement, mechanical, an anonymous exercise in sex.

Then without warning George suddenly pulled away, throwing himself up and back against the wooden headboard, for all the world as if a scorpion had just crawled across the sheet.

Jeanie blinked up at him in the darkness. 'What's the matter, what is it?'

Without a word her husband leapt out of bed and snapped on the bedside light. He stood there naked, his arms clasped round his chest, staring down at his wife. It was all she could do not to recoil, his brown eyes were so cold, empty.

'I . . . can't . . . do this.' He spoke slowly, carefully, as if he were feeling his way around the words.

She reached towards him, but he held out his arm, palm angled towards her, fending her off, although she hadn't moved from her side of the bed. With the other hand he reached down to pick up his navy pyjama trousers, which he clutched to his body like a shield.

'I don't understand, George. Tell me. Say what you mean.' Jeanie felt her breath catch uncomfortably in her throat as she sat up to face him.

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George did not reply, just stood there. 'I mean . . .' He spoke like a drowning man refusing rescue. 'I can't do it any more.'

'Can't do what? George?'

He turned away from her, picking his glasses up from the bedside table as he made for the door.

Jeanie jumped up and raced after him. 'Where are you going? George? You can't just leave me like that. Is it something I've done? Please . . . tell me.'

But George shook her off, barely glancing at her. 'I'll sleep in the spare room.'

I can't do it any more. His words haunted her as she lay alone in the crumpled bed, shocked and above all, bewildered. Their life together, twenty-two years of it now, was orderly, you might even say a little dull. They never argued, as long as Jeanie accepted George's apparently benign need to control her. Then tonight it felt as if she had been unwittingly perched on top of a volcano that had suddenly decided to erupt. What had got into her husband?

In the morning, George behaved as if nothing had happened. She came down to the sunny kitchen in her nightdress to find him laying out the breakfast cups and plates, the marmalade pot, the butter dish with its lid in the shape of a cow, just as he always did.

'What happened last night?' She slumped, exhausted, at the kitchen table.

He looked up from his task of filling the stainless-steel kettle as if her question was puzzling to him.

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‘Nothing happened. I was tired.’

‘And that’s it?’ she demanded, dazed. ‘That’s all you have to say?’

Still clutching the kettle, he raised his eyebrows at her. ‘Don’t make your usual drama out of this, Jeanie. I’ve got a lot on at work. I said, I’m tired.’

He set the kettle on its stand and carefully flicked the button, smoothing his burgundy tie over his immaculate white shirt and into the band of his grey pinstriped trousers, held up with scarlet braces.

Jeanie waited, wondering for a moment if she had imagined it all. ‘George, you ran away from me last night as if I’d suddenly developed ten heads. I don’t need to invent a drama.’

George strolled nonchalantly round the table behind her, and she caught the mild scent of the shaving soap she had bought him for Christmas as he dropped a brief kiss on her head. ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ He opened the fridge. ‘Juice? I’m doing you a boiled egg.’

George had never come back to her bed. Now, nearly ten years later, Jeanie lay and listened to her husband’s firm tread on the floorboards above her head. It was hardly five-thirty, but this was late for George. She traced his usual path to the bathroom, heard the cistern flushing, the water running down the pipes, then the criss-crossing of the bedroom in search of his clothes. His routine had never varied for the thirty-two years of their marriage, but she

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had not been allowed to share it with him since that strange night. And to this day she was no closer to understanding why he had done it than she had been then. She had badgered him almost daily at first for an explanation. If he had performance anxiety, that could be dealt with. If it was something she'd done, just say. *Come back to our bed, please, George, please* – she had pleaded, cajoled, abased herself in her desire for things to return to normal.

The incident sat huge and painful between their every exchange back then, but through it all George said not a word, just point-blank refused to engage with her on the subject – there wasn't a reason, it wasn't her fault, and he would not, perhaps could not, talk about it. Jeanie got so tired of the constant tension that in the end she had simply given up, telling nobody, not even her best friend Rita, because in an odd way she felt ashamed. Surely, despite George's assurance to the contrary, it must be a poor reflection on her sexuality.

Her confidence crushed, Jeanie made no move to seduce him after that night. Only once, about a year later, when both had had too much to drink, did he follow Jeanie to what was now her bedroom, and they began a drunken fumbling, fully clothed, on the covers. But almost immediately, even through the haze of alcohol, she sensed a tortured indecision in her husband's caress. His hand fluttered, hardly committed, over her skin, his body held back from hers, even as he kissed her mouth. And then, as before, the shutters suddenly came down and he pushed her firmly away as

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if she were some corrupting temptress, quickly and silently dragging himself off the bed and out of her room.

Their marriage had adapted. Not all at once, of course: more a slow, painful fade of emotion, as Jeanie's anger at her husband's silence – which was much more tormenting even than the event itself – became contained, rationalized as an inevitable sacrifice to her marriage. Her childhood had been defined by sacrifice – *Jesus died that we might live. Remember this and be thankful. Amen* – had been her father's favourite grace. Fervidly pious, Reverend Dickenson based his life on harsh and joyless duty, and he expected the same of his family, the vicarage silent with anticipation of his rigidly imposed will.

George had bought her the shop premises soon after, perhaps with some cockeyed notion of compensation, and she had thrown herself into her business with energy and enthusiasm. And she was successful. The health-food shop, Pomegranate, sat halfway up Highgate Hill. It sold the usual vitamins, herbal remedies and dry goods, but also organic vegetables, cheeses, fresh juices and smoothies, delicious wholegrain breads and deli products. Jeanie had gradually built up a reliable set of regulars, some of whom came from quite a distance to shop with her, but also, especially in the summer, her deli sandwiches drew in passing trade en route to Hampstead Heath for picnics.

She must have dropped back to sleep, because the next thing she heard was, 'Morning.' She watched George carefully

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placing the hot mug of tea on the bedside table. 'It's a spectacular day.' He pulled back the heavy curtains enthusiastically, letting the early spring sunshine flood the room, then stood smiling down at Jeanie, hands on his hips. His grey hair was neatly combed, tortoiseshell glasses crooked as always – one ear was higher than the other they'd decided years ago, although it didn't appear so to look at him – giving him an intensely vulnerable air.

'What've you got on today?'

She yawned. 'Interview with a new girl for the shop. Jola doesn't trust herself after she chose the last one. Meeting with a new supplier of vegan packed lunches; checking out a second-hand chill cabinet – the one by the window's knackered. Then Ellie.' They both smiled at the thought of their granddaughter. 'You?'

George moved off towards the door with his customary gangling lope. 'Not as much as you, old girl. Golf this afternoon. Give that adorable little girl a huge hug from her grandad.'

His tone was deliberately cheerful, but she detected – as always since the insurance company he'd worked for, man and boy, had 'offered' him early retirement five years ago – a desire to seem busier than he was. He had only once alluded to it, a few months after leaving his job: the feeling that he was now 'a bit of a spare part', as he put it. But it had changed things between them. She had felt almost guilty at first, getting off to work with her customary enthusiasm every day and leaving him to hover idle and lonely between golf

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games. He had rallied, however, taking up his boyhood hobby of buying old clocks, pulling them apart and mending them, and now the house was thick with them: every available surface tick-tocking, mostly out of synch, as if the shelves and bureau tops themselves were alive. Only in Jeanie's bedroom was there quiet. But she felt her husband's obsessive nature, contained in the face of a useful career, was slowly burgeoning. And with it an uncomfortably familiar need to control her. This had always been there between them, but recently it seemed to have lost its sense of humour.