

## WHERE SORROWS END

They sat on, over their drinks, night after night. She cowered speechless, staring into darkness. He began to feel that he had broached the subject of divorce too early in the holiday. Now they were stuck with each other; to all intents and purposes a comfortable couple approaching late middle age, their children grown and gone, peaceful companions with little to discuss in the lengthening nights. For it was already September, despite the passionate crickets and the midges building mighty towers in the unmoving air above the carp ponds. The Altes Kurhaus stood poised on the bank between the Teutonic primeval forest and five artificial lakes ringed with marsh reeds and bull-rushes. The swans were still there, cruising the waters like armed battleships. The coots bristled, quarrelled and dashed at one another, their webbed feet beating the surface. It was still hot at midday. But the year had tilted past its zenith. At night the settled smell of cut stubble and dust lay damp beneath the faint mist that rose from the carp ponds. Far below in unruffled waters the dark forms circled, paused, came together, vanished.

He suffered from gout in his toes; and so she walked round the carp ponds alone in her sensible shoes, down the wooded path by the whispering sluice, left at the bottom of the market gardens where the abandoned chimneys of the Schloss Brauerei loomed over the rows of cabbages and the shimmering poplars, on towards the bridge. Here she lingered, steadying the turmoil in her stomach. I am fifty-seven. My husband has met another woman.

He wants a divorce. He tells me he is inclined to be generous. Apparently I own nothing, deserve nothing, have never earned my living or paid my way. I am to have the house. He wants his freedom as quickly as possible so that he can marry again. The children cannot be told until the matter is settled. He will not tell me her name.

Why won't he tell me her name?

Do I know her?

He doesn't answer and his silence means that I do.

Her anger leaped in her chest like an electric charge. The world had changed. She was now confronting a sinister ethical landscape where all the rules could be shattered with impunity. She had believed in the established order of things, an order within which constancy was rewarded by fidelity, hard work was praised, no one ran up irrecoverable debts, and love was returned tenfold. She had raised her boys to be thoughtful, loyal, caring men. They brought her breakfast in bed on her birthdays, negotiated their pocket money without displaying noticeable greed, and asked to be excused when they rose from the table. She was familiar with a world of daily politeness, flowers on the dresser in the hall, a faint smell of beeswax and two gardeners raking the leaves, their gestures identical, moving slowly across the damp lawns. She cherished her household, replete with embarrassment and apology, where everyone said please and thank you and left the room without breaking the furniture. She loved predictable regularity, enjoyed the small quiet things: her garden in autumn, the beds dug and turned, the challenge of thinking up topics of conversation to share with her hairdresser, photocopying the boys' school reports and sending them off to their grandmothers, enclosing modest little notes of proud

understatement. Now she was faced with the underside of things, an eerie buried world of lies and doubleness, a world where nothing was simple or clean. She was unable to step forwards into this hideous present. The transition was too painful and momentous. Were she to take this single step the safe world behind her would be locked forever. And so she faced the carp ponds, suddenly darkening as shadows closed the sun.

She walked on in hazy light, the stream on one side and the still ponds on the other, stretching away towards the orchards that lunged up the hill. She smelt the other woman's terrible sexual presence warming her back. For the first time in thirty years they were sleeping in a room with twin beds. Her ageing body, which swelled in odd places, was no longer warmed by his paunch and balding legs. He shut the door when he patronised the bathroom. She heard a series of muffled farts and a descending shower of piss. Never before had he farted in private, nor had he ever excluded their boys from family discussions. I would prefer it, he said, if we kept this matter between ourselves, until we have it all sorted out.

This is the matter in hand: a small matter of thirty years attentive service, a promising career abandoned, a woman alone at home with her children, faithful, good-humoured, fond of gardening, ferrying her sons to music lessons and sports events, happy to entertain his colleagues, a woman whose reading became surreptitiously easier, middle-brow and reassuring, a woman who began to enjoy whodunnits on the telly and found the X-files incomprehensible.

Who has stolen my life and my husband?

She gazed at the drifting carp, stealthy as submarines beneath the lake, cruising in widening circles. A frog leaped from

the grass beneath her feet and shook the murky surface. I didn't see him. He was the same colour as the grass.

Why can't I see her, who has purloined my happiness, who wears my dresses and kisses my husband goodnight?

She replays their first attempt at the matter on the table before them.

There's someone else who has become very important to me.

Don't be ridiculous. You'll soon be sixty. We should be thinking about retirement, not divorce.

My life's not over. I'm not ready to give up living yet.

Who is she?

I thought you knew.

And he was genuinely surprised that she didn't know. She bent down and studied the browning grass carefully, searching for the second frog. I thought you knew. That means that she is here, before me. Why can't I see her?

And then, in the uncanny waters, now reforming, placid and dark, she begins to discern a face. At first the face shimmers, pale and unstable, fragmented into zones. Then the waters gather their breath, sigh and hold still, so that she can see the drowned face clearly, far beneath her. The warm air falls silent. There are no longer any insects buzzing in the rushes. She is here, she is here, looking up. A wide forehead, clear dark eyes and her straight hair pulled back. I gave her that necklace years ago. She never takes it off. She says she thinks of me when she gazes at the mirror in the mornings. She is wearing a dark red shirt that used to be mine. I gave her all my clothes. She never had any money. I used to buy new clothes for her. I'd tell her I had bought them for myself but they didn't suit, didn't fit, so that she wouldn't be ashamed to accept cast-offs and hand-me-downs. I saved her pride, pandered

to her dignity, but now here she is, submerged in silence, surrounded by her dark suitors, the carp plucking at her naked wrists, her bound feet. Here she is, her eyes pleading, begging me to understand, to listen to her as I have always done, begging my forgiveness. For this is my face as it was a decade ago, when I was still supple and charming. This is my figure, but slender, not bulbous. This is a more beautiful and younger version of myself. This is my sister.

I sit down in the grass on the damp brink and wait. For you will come here to me. You know because he has told you, that we are settling the matter between us and you will never keep away.

You were always there, my sister, my love, turning up, full of apologies, between boyfriends, husbands, houses, jobs. You hurtled round the garden getting muddy with the boys, marched them to school in the mornings, played battleships in the bath, wore my apron in the kitchen when you cooked, watched black and white subtitled films with my husband and pronounced the director's name correctly, as if you too were Spanish. He loved your bright willingness to turn every evening into a fiesta. You were the one wielding the bottle opener, popping cheap champagne, celebrating small events, wolfing tubes of crisps. You were the woman who leaped from sofa to armchair howling like Tarzan at our Christmas party. You wore a mini-skirt on your fortieth birthday, and on you it looked good. I built my home with monstrous care. There was always one extra room. A room for you.

*Come into my garden, my sister, my love, for the summer is gone and the frost will creep silent beside us along all the rivers and streams. Come to me, come to me, girl of my heart. I have more than my love to enrich you,*

*and all that is mine is now yours to delight you. I have opened my house and my heart. I long for you, search for you. Here is my hand to receive you. I stand by the lakes in the forest. Many waters cannot quench my love, neither can the floods drown it. If a man would give all the substance of his house for love his deed would be utterly condemned. But I do this for you, my sister, my love. This is the spell which recalls you. This is the glamour which conjures you up.*

Here is your suppliant's face in the water before me, begging me to love you enough to vanish gracefully, to stand backstage applauding your performance as his second wife. This is your last chance to have the life I chose. Implicit in your pleading gaze is the vicious edge of your jealousy. I hear you whispering - you've had your turn. Now get out. Your face in the water twists and shudders. I was always so gentle with you. Now I tape up your mouth so that you cannot scream. We are at the fifth pond. They come here once a week to feed the fish. You are wearing my clothes. I strip them off you, ripping the silk, breaking the zip. You shall take nothing of mine with you down to that dark kingdom where you can be mistress forever. Your shoes are your own: sexy, flimsy sandals with tiny straps across your painted toes. Done up like a whore and you'll get what's coming to you. Go on, sink, wearing your revolting erotic shoes. I can't take the necklace. That was my gift to you in the days when you were my lovely, fragile little sister and I laid all my treasures before you. The beautiful drowned face gazes once more into mine. My pretty brilliant sister, so lovely and duplicitous. The weeds shift back, covering your eyes. In their place I see the suggestive flicker of the dark carp. How my secret knowledge of you supports me now. You can't swim. You fear water. And best of all, you trust me.

Did you really believe that I would stand aside for you? As I have always done?

Now she is striding the rim of the carp ponds, pushing the rushes aside. She is carrying a neatly folded pile of clothes. Her step is lighter; the small matter of her broken marriage is settled to her satisfaction. She has touched the place where all losses are restored and sorrows end. Her purpose is steady and clear. Her intentions take shape. Murder has lodged in her heart.