

ONE

She'd flounced out, not looking back. He watched her go, unemotionally, in that old coat, baggy trousers, strange woolly hat and pondered yet again on how she had become so cold, so distant, seemingly uncaring. The low growl of the diesel faded and the quiet wrapped itself round him. He shrugged, went back into the kitchen and moved the kettle across on the hob.

Outside the early morning rain had eased, clouds breaking up into straggling wisps of things that blew away over the treeline; the first glint of watery sun gave flashes of luminescence to the hanging drops of water released from grateful shrubs. Coffee mug full, he went out into the sodden garden, the lawn squelching under foot. The air felt good, cool but fresh, renewed; he felt his spirit lift as the first daffodils bounced their heads in greeting and the hen blackbird swooped down from the apple tree to stand, head poised, waiting for morning crumbs. With a laugh, he retraced his steps to find the box and scatter crumbs on the grass. At least the bird appreciated the attention, unlike his wife. She'd made her own breakfast, her own coffee, eaten in a hurry and given precious little regard to the suggestion they ate sitting down, and together.

'You know how much I have to fit in today,' had been the rejoinder. His early morning attempts to show affection, a hand brushed across a thigh, her breasts, stirringly soft, had been rebuffed with her grunt and move to crush his hand beneath her. Then she'd slid out and got dressed before him. So many times had he waited for some hint she might relish a cuddle, just a kiss even, but the moon was crying, crying, crying . . .

The glow of the ashes had dimmed, the last crackle of sparks extinguished, the cold was getting to his very bones.

He'd go for a long walk. She wouldn't be back for hours, going from one minor necessity to another, taking strange pride in being so disorganised. Once they had walked together, arm in arm, laughing and chattering, stealing the occasional kiss, the fondle, and even once or twice had lain in the long grass and made love, achingly beautifully. Not now. Time had moved on, taken away and stolen the essence of togetherness, that indefinable thing called love. Now it was like maintaining a business, keeping the wheels turning, day running into boring day. At least they didn't actually quarrel, not really. The odd spat, nothing untoward, but just that sad indicator of things no longer as happy as they'd once been. He drained his mug, tipped the dregs away and returned to the house. Ten minutes later, suitably clad in old Barbour and stout shoes, and with his indispensable favourite walking stick, he was making his way up the lane.

The wet spring weather hadn't done the lane any favours. The ruts were deep and brimming with last night's rain; it was as much as he could do to advance along the edges without getting sopping wet feet, all clagged up with mud. As it was, the longer grass brushed his trouser bottoms and the thick socks to start damping the fabric. Long straggles of thorn and blackberry springing across the path he snipped away with the shrub-pruners he always carried, making reasonable progress towards the open fields. The whirr and alarm cackle of a cock pheasant were startling; the pigeons' wings beating on the tree branches as a dozen or so took flight were annoying, breaking into the stillness. Otherwise there was just the dripping moisture and the distant sound of occasional traffic; scarce any vestiges of a breeze but the last of the clouds were disappearing. It was, eventually, going to be a fine morning. Swinging his stick, he turned into the pasture. The ground sloped away, running down into the small valley with the tree-lined brook. Behind the lower wood the old Manor House was just visible, the church spire from the next village appearing over its roof, but he knew it was still a couple

of miles away. He'd never been close to the Manor, always found it easier to walk along the old road. Maybe today.

Now the going was easier and he was able to rid his shoes of the encrusted mud picked up from the lane, wiping them sideways on the longer tufts. The hedgerow was beginning to green up, first buds opening, nettle shoots showing darker green frilly leaves above the winter yellowed grass. This was more like it, out in the open, only country sights and sounds. No phones, no idle chat; let the tension unwind. Coming to that strangely placed seat, he took a few minutes respite; reached for a chocolate bar out of his capacious pockets and relaxed. Peace and serenity, no one to interfere with thoughts or actions. He allowed the spirit of the place to ease his mind, take away something of the perpetual greyness of his days.

Surveying the lie of the land below, his eye caught the emergence of a solitary horse rider, out from the lower wood and along the old track. Nothing unusual; there were all sorts of horsey people in the neighbourhood, from youngsters, usually girls, to the gruff old foxhunting type he couldn't quite get on with. He often met one or two riders while he was out, always careful either to stay out of sight or to be easily visible from a distance, so as not to startle the horses. This one seemed to be having difficulty, the animal rearing up and not wanting to move. As he watched, the rider managed to pull the horse round, but it bucked, and suddenly, he, she, he couldn't tell, was off, and the horse had gone. Stupid animal, he thought, and realised he was going to have to go and see what was up, for no one else was about.

Striding briskly along the field edge, doing half-jumps from tussock to tussock, covering the ground rapidly without running, it took near five, ten, minutes to reach the lane. A struggle with the slope of the ditch; a briar tore at his hand as he forced his way through the hawthorn. No sign of the horse, but its rider lay sprawled out on the grass of the lane edge, seemingly unconscious. Oh Lord, he thought, and I've come out without my phone. Damn!

Kneeling down, he saw the girl, - it had to be a girl - had a bruised forehead, her jodhpur clad legs sprawled akimbo, an arm twisted under her, the other flung wide as though clutching at the grass. Her helmet was askew, the strap cutting at her chin. No obvious bleeding, no signs of anything broken. She was breathing, thank God. With some diffidence, unused to such demands on his rusty first aid skills, he straightened her legs, released her helmet strap, and half turned her as best he could to the so-called recovery position. Her pulse was okay. In her thirties, maybe early forties, oval features, longish dark hair. Attractive, in a strange way, rather Italianate. Now what? No kiss of life required, but he couldn't just leave her, neither could he summon assistance. And it was a mile and a half to the village, cross-country, longer by road. The Manor House lay three-quarters of a mile up the track. So what to do? That thump on her head, must have been where she'd landed; that would have knocked her out. Maybe she'd . . . and just as he thought, hoped, she'd come round, she did. A flutter of those eyelashes, a stir, and then eyes wide open. Panic, alarm, maybe fear, and she struggled to sit up.

'Bouncer! He threw me. Blasted horse! Where is he?' She made to get up, then held a hand to her head, touched the graze and winced. 'Ouch! I'm sorry. Bloody horse!' There was a trace of a smile, a wry smile, and she held out a shaky hand. 'Roberta. Smiley. Pleased to meet you, glad you were here. Help me up?' It was a plea, not a command.

He stood up, took the gloved hand and held it firmly as she pulled on him to get her feet underneath her. She wasn't all that tall, and reasonably slim. Her dark hair, released from the helmet, flowed back onto her shoulders and she brushed it away from her bruised forehead.

'I'm going to look a sight, aren't I?' Another wry smile. 'I suppose I'd better find that stupid animal. He's probably gone back home.'

'Home?'

'The Old Manor. Up there.' She pointed. 'You are . . . ?'

'Oh yes, sorry. Andrew, Andrew Hailsworthy. From

Trellam. I saw the battle, from the hill. Out walking to get some sense into my lungs. I think you may be right; I saw the animal go up the track. Can I give you a hand?’

‘You have.’ She grinned at him. He was still holding hers.

‘Sorry!’ He made to release her, but instead, surprisingly, she pulled him towards her, and kissed, lightly, quickly, on the cheek. Then she let go.

‘Just a small token of appreciation. For being around, and being concerned. It makes a change.’ She turned half round and stared up the lane. ‘Will you see me home? Just in case I faint or something?’

‘Surely. Kill two birds. I’d been meaning to walk round the Manor anyway. I didn’t know who lived there; it’s always looked semi-derelict.’ Then realising that sounded like a criticism he attempted to redress his mistake, ‘It blends so well into the scenery.’

She laughed again, and her laugh was happiness itself. How little laughter he’d heard lately; and she had smiled and she’d *kissed him?*

‘Please don’t talk about killing birds. This bird nearly got herself killed. Then your morning might have taken on a different light. Come on, I’ll organise us a drink.’

‘You sure you’re feeling okay?’

He was concerned, she could feel it, and her insides did a little skip. How long since anyone had been concerned about *her?* Maybe that bloody horse had done her a favour, apart from giving her a fright and a gi-normous headache. Nothing an aspirin wouldn’t cure. She’d have to own up to the headache. ‘Apart from the head, yes. Stiff, and probably bruises where bruises oughtn’t to be, but a good hot bath will help.’ *I was always used to bruises anyway*, she thought, wryly.

They made their way slowly up the lane, Andrew holding her arm with his free hand. He stole a glance at her a time or two, but she seemed to be lost in thought. Reaching the five bar gate to the Manor gardens, she paused and whistled, then whistled again.

‘Bloody horse!’ She stepped back and peered over the hedge into the adjoining pasture. ‘There he is! Well, he can

effing well stay saddled for a while. I'll get Mary to see to him.' He wasn't entirely used to hearing a woman swear, but somehow it didn't seem out of character with this one. Forthright she was, but not unpleasantly so. She lifted the gate latch and ushered him through. 'You're not pushed for time?'

'No. Not at all; my own master. At least, while I'm out, minding all the 'Do this, do that, why haven't you done the other?' instructions he'd get from Samantha.

'Good. Then stay for some lunch.' She expected no refusal, evidently, and strode on up the drive. So she wasn't as badly shaken up after all? He shook his head, blinked, and followed.

The Manor, seen at close quarters, oozed that sense of sublime indifference to age, the weathered stone matching the time-worn woodwork, and from what he could see, still in good repair. The immediate garden was tidy, not at all flamboyant, with close cut lawn and well trimmed edges. She opened the wide plain oak panelled front door and preceded him inside. A feeling of warmth and peace enveloped him with the scent of old timber and wax polish. The hall carpet was a deep crimson and blue, hand woven, the centre table solid walnut and gleaming, a vase of fresh daffodils in its centre. Two old landscape paintings hung on the panelled walls and there was a fireplace all set with logs. It could have been pure National Trust.

'Mareeee!' She called, not loudly, but with an authoritative voice. She unbuttoned her coat, unzipped her riding boots. He stood, unsure, until she looked up at him. 'Take your coat off? Then help me with these things.' Again, authority, but with a different edge.

He unzipped his Barbour, laid it on one of the oak chairs. She sat down on the other one and stuck a foot out for him to pull the one boot off, then the other. Coat removed, she was slimmer than he first thought, but . . . she caught his glance and grinned at him.

'I do look a bit of a fright, don't I? Well, take those shoes off, I don't mind stocking feet; and I'll show you into my sitting room. Then I'll clear off upstairs and improve things a bit.

Where is she? Mareeee!' She called again, louder.

A door opened at the back of the hall and an apron clad buxom woman, fiftyish, appeared.

'Mary. This is Andrew. He saw Bouncer chuck me off and was good enough to come and make sure I hadn't been hurt. When you get a moment, can you get Bouncer in from the Home Paddock and unsaddle him for me? I'd only call him names if I did it, and I'm not in the mood. After lunch will do. Andrew's staying. Least I can do. Look, you show him the sitting room, and I'll nip up and get changed.' She picked up her boots and jacket and ran lightly up the staircase and disappeared across the open landing above.

Mary was shaking her head. 'That girl, she'll never stop. Fell off again, did she? That 'orse she got be too big for 'er. Hurt hersen?'

'I don't think so, apart from her bruising. But she *did* get knocked unconscious, so perhaps she'd best be checked over - concussion and all that?'

'You be right. I'll have her see Dr Knowles tomorrow. Landed me sorting Bouncer again; Bouncer by name and nature, that one. She'd best get rid, but don't ee tell 'er I said. This way, young man.' She led the way through the rear door into a corridor and from there into a delightful room, with cosy armchairs, a couple of occasional tables and through the leaded window a view down the valley beyond the garden. More flowers, hyacinths this time, in bowls, and another fireplace, cosily warming the room with the logs flaming as she stirred them.

She replaced the poker on its stand. 'Make yoursen at home. Dare say she won't be long. Chicken sandwiches orlright for 'ee?'

'Fine, yes, anything, er, I. Roberta - Mrs Smythe - she on her own?'

Mary gave him a sideways glance with her correction. 'Smiley. She be. Since himself ran off with his *personal assistant*.' She sniffed; her tone full of derision and contempt. 'Near a year, that be. Cost him, that did. Still, not for me to say. Back in jiff.'

She left him alone, allowing him to browse the books in the half-wall of a bookcase. The titles always gave away a person's interests, and he was pleasantly surprised at the diverse collection. History, people, adventure, a nice collection of art catalogues; the odd book on birds and trees; fascinatingly, a few novels, mainly, from what he could see, romance. Hardbacks and originals, not your book club cheapies or three for two's.

The door opened and he turned to a delight. Her long hair now tied back in a twirled sort of knot; a plain and revealingly close fitting jersey dress in a linen colour, with a wide leather belt. At her breast a simple brooch in silver and marcasite. She'd evidently powdered over her bruise, but it still showed up as a florid red. Simple shoes, but raised heels. And a slight waft of scent; a real treat of a girl.

She caught his eyes as soon as she entered the room, and held them. Deep brown, he noticed, and a firm gaze.

'Well, that feels better.' She dropped into what must surely be her favourite chair with a large plumped-up cushion; a book on the side. 'It's a bit like the lunatic banging his head on the wall.' She paused, waiting, but then a trifle disappointed he didn't respond, finished the phrase: 'It's nice when you stop. I'm not sure I really enjoy riding, but as I have the horse, the gear and the country, I keep up appearances.' She crossed her legs, smoothing her skirt over her knees. 'Do sit down, Andrew; Mary will be here shortly with a bite of lunch. Would you like a drink? I've beer if you care for it at this time of day?'

Now, there's a trap if ever there was, he thought. 'Thank you, no. Whatever you're having, tea, coffee . . .'

She interrupted him. 'Sherry?'

'Fine. You're very kind.'

'It's you who's the kind one. So long as you don't feel obliged. How come we've not met before? Have you been in the village long?'

He smiled. Often the way, you see someone new only to discover they've been around for ages; it's just that you don't move in the same circles. Samantha would likely know her, or of her, she knew everybody, from school or church or Women's

Institute or Farmer's Markets, fingers in every pie. His own accountancy job that kept him behind the home office desk most days lessened his chances of meeting local folk and his lack of interest in meaningless social functions didn't help.

'Only ten years. Before that, in town. I'm afraid I don't get involved with much locally. My wife does, you may know of her. Samantha.' As he answered her question, she'd lifted herself out of her chair in a simple fluid movement that he found strangely appealing, crossing to a cupboard on a table that was evidently the drinks cabinet. There would be a name for it, he knew, in the antique furniture trade, but he couldn't for the life of him remember.

With a half turned head towards him, she raised a delightful eyebrow. 'Dry, medium or sweet?' She smiled. 'I'm showing off. Sorry. I may know your Samantha, but I can't place the name. Since my former husband ditched me for a different flavour I've kept a bit out of things. Embarrassing, finding you're not quite the bee's knees anymore. At least he paid for his mistake. Well, perhaps not such a mistake. My good fortune in a way. Mary said?' She obviously knew her housekeeper's foibles. 'She's always been on my side. A treasure, as the books say. What do you do, Andrew?'

'Accountant; my own business. Medium would be fine, thank you. Used to work for a large company, but got bored, so now I work for myself, from home most of the time. Has its compensations and its downsides. How about yourself?' He took the glass she proffered, relishing the feel of well-cut crystal. She returned to her chair and he tried to ignore the fleeting but tantalising glimpse of thigh as she crossed her legs.

'Me? I do some interior design consultancy, off and on. More off, lately. I'm too choosey when it comes to clients, I suppose.' She sipped her sherry, levelled her deep brown eyes at him, and there was a hint of another smile. 'I'm my own person, I decide. Too forthright for some, that included my ex. He didn't like women who stood up for themselves. Maybe one reason he wandered off. At least he left me this place - for the time being.' She put her glass down on the side table. 'I

have to spend a fair few days in town now and again, to earn enough to pay the bills, but it's nice to come back into the country. Do you go walking a lot, Andrew?'

Before he could answer, a light tap on the door prefaced Mary's arrival with a tray. He got up to help her move an occasional table into the centre. In this room you wouldn't call it a coffee table, he thought. There was a plateful of assorted sandwiches, neatly arranged, lettuce and tomato trimmed; a few bridge rolls with chicken slices, a small bowl of mayonnaise, china plates, little silver knives and proper serviettes. Charming, utterly charming, and a far cry from the 'get it yourself' routine back home. If Mary had been wearing a black dress, white cap and pinny he would have thought himself back in the 1930's. But then Roberta would have been in a longer dress . . . Mary looked at her mistress, who merely nodded and smiled dismissal.

'Please, help yourself.' As Mary closed the door behind her, Roberta destroyed the illusion. 'She only does this to impress the guests, Andrew. I don't get this treatment on my own, I assure you. It's what's called 'keeping up the standard.' She laughed, briefly, quietly, more a musical chuckle. 'No bad thing, I suppose; better than eating on the hoof. Go on, don't stand on ceremony. Another sherry?' She leant forward, piled sandwiches and a roll onto a plate, put a dollop of mayonnaise on the edge, and sat back.

Andrew copied her, shook his head at the sherry. Any more and he'd start talking silly. Sherry on an empty tum was already making him feel fuzzy edged. 'This is nice. I could get used to being pampered. 'Eating on the hoof' is probably more my norm, regretfully. In answer to your question, I don't walk as much as I would like to, but the country round here isn't all that brilliant for proper walking. Too many hedges and ditches and farmers who plough up field-edge pathways. How about yourself - do you walk or is it always horseback?' He couldn't help himself adding, light heartedly, 'when you can stay on!'

There was a bit more of a laugh from the girl. Lovely, it was, to hear some laughter; the humour was missing more often

than not in his world. Her sandwich disappeared before she replied, narrowing her eyes at him.

‘Are you disputing my riding skills, Mr Hailsworthy?’ Then another laugh, ‘you’re right; I should be able to manage him better. I think it was a bit of polythene flapping in the hedge that spooked him, and I haven’t quite got the strength I should have for his size. My ex. used to ride him, but his new model didn’t care for horses, so he got left.’ She paused. ‘I’m sorry, Andrew, to intrude on your morning like this. But I am grateful, really, and it’s nice to have company. Another sandwich or two? Perhaps we ought to have coffee. I’ll ask Mary,’ and she was out of her chair and across to the door, that same sinuously appealing fluid movement, before he could politely protest.

While she was gone, he finished his plateful and another sandwich, before taking another glance around the room. Yes, the interior decoration skill was tastefully evident. Curtains in such a lovely deep blue; the soft furnishings looked – to him – generally all in tune, the furniture well chosen, not really old, but certainly no veneered chipboard here. She must know what she wanted, and, importantly, where to find it – usually half the problem. Better than mooching round a DIY store where he was dragged more often than not to give credence to Samantha’s concepts of décor. He liked the room, he felt at home; there was a lovely comforting atmosphere and it wasn’t just because he saw Roberta as an interesting person, either. The hyacinths, a Wedgwood blue, were scenting the room. He’d picked up another sandwich and taken his first bite when Roberta reappeared, percolator in one hand and a couple of mugs in the other.

‘Sorry,’ she said, gaily, ‘Mary’s cross with me, not using a proper coffee pot and the ‘right cups’” She imitated her helper’s accent. ‘But I guess you don’t mind mugs, so long as I haven’t spoiled the effect. At least its proper coffee – Taylor’s best . . .’ The coffee was poured and she passed him a mug. ‘Black, no sugar? I’ll fetch milk and sugar if you like?’

‘No, this is fine, thanks. You’re too kind. Nothing like this anticipated when I left home. I shouldn’t overstay my

welcome. Samantha will be back mid afternoon.' They were still standing up and he began to feel uncomfortable beside her; that subtle scent and her close proximity were powerful interactions. The coffee was hot, so he could only sip.

Silence; then, 'you're welcome any time, Andrew. You're good company; really. I miss having friends here. Most of mine are in town. What few people we knew properly round here seemed to think I chased my ex away.' She perched on the arm of her chair, swung a shapely leg. 'Why don't you and your wife come to dinner one evening? I can always rustle up someone from town to give the right impression. I'd love to show you the rest of the house, if you're interested, that is. And Mary's a very good cook.' It was for all the world as if she was beseeching him to come back. Well, why not?

'You're very kind,' he was repeating himself. 'I think we'd love to. So long as you're sure?'

Her expression hardened. 'I wouldn't invite you otherwise. Of course I'm sure. How about next Friday? I'm in London until Thursday. Give me a call to confirm, if you have to discuss it with your wife, Andrew.' He noticed she didn't use other people's Christian names, just their role. Her ex, his wife. She slipped off the chair arm and moved to the door. He was being dismissed. He finished his coffee; put the mug carefully down on the tray. Suddenly conscious he was just in socks, he felt embarrassed. She followed him out and into the hall, where he slipped his shoes back on and felt better.

She picked up his old tatty Barbour and handed it to him, gravely. 'Seen some service, hasn't it?'

He shrugged it on, struggled a bit with the zip, and looked for his stick, finding it propped up by the door where he'd left it.

'Thank you for looking after me,' she said. 'Mary's suggested I look in the Doctor's Surgery tomorrow. I'll do that, just to set your mind at rest.' She was standing in front of him again, arms at her sides. He bent down and kissed her cheek, warm, soft, breathed more of her scent. She turned her head only slightly. He could have kissed her properly, held her, hugged her, but he didn't. Was that disappointment in her

eyes? She moved, quickly, to the door, and once opened, he was gone, walking steadily up the gravel drive and away.

A deep breath, watching him, but he didn't turn or wave. The door closed; in the empty hall there was just the sound of the clock ticking, otherwise the silence of the house had folded itself around her once more, as though she was smothering in velvet.

* * *

Andrew strode on, his mind churning the events of the day. Now the middle of the afternoon, the sun had given up the struggle in front of the oncoming cloudbank. It was turning cool, so all he wanted to do now was get home. What sort of a welcome he'd get was another matter, but the interlude with Roberta had boosted his morale and as he felt her invitation to return was no mere polite social gesture, maybe, just maybe, there was somewhere he could go now and again to break the monotony, so long as he didn't upset Samantha. He stepped out; taking the road back was going to be the better option, he didn't fancy the field route now the light was going. The damp of the night had gone, the few puddles remaining had shrunk, but with the rising wind the chill factor increased and so did his pace. The local farmer's beaten-up old Landrover clattered past him, he thought he got a wave but wasn't sure. Then the local bus lumbered past on its rounds, leaving a waft of diesel smoke. The afternoon had markedly deteriorated and the morning evidently far the better part of the day. He turned the corner, reached the start of the kerbed tarmac path, ducked under those pendulous yew branches he'd promised himself he'd prune but hadn't yet plucked up enough courage to do, and pushed open the side gate. The car was back. Well, at least the kettle would be on. He heaved a sigh, and opened the kitchen door.

Samantha was standing over the pile of groceries heaped on the kitchen worktop, checking the long till list in her hand, item by item. She barely looked up. 'The flour's gone up again.

And they haven't taken those vouchers off. It's a nightmare! Everything was a nightmare to Samantha. 'Wretched car park was full up with mothers and toddlers. I didn't get your batteries, sorry, couldn't park round by the Mill. If you want some tea you'll have to get the kettle on.' She didn't ask where he'd been, if he'd had a good day. She'd be out again by six, some Committee meeting or other. 'I'll have to grab a pizza or something. There's some of that stew left, or you can get a piece of chicken out the freezer.' She started to put the shopping away. 'Oh, by the way, the interior light's gone on the car. Get it fixed, will you?'

There was always something. No greeting, no acknowledgement despite the twenty odd years they'd been together and he'd been the only man in her life. Taken for granted he'd always be there, servicing her every need without regard for his feelings, his own wishes for his life. Even in bed, he doubted she'd know if he wasn't there, some nights. Yet he still loyally stayed by her, perhaps because it was the soft option, or the memories of what had been, or even what could be again. The two children were almost past history with her, the one married and out of sight, the other stuck in endless studying at University.

'I met the owner of the Manor today.' It was something to say.

'Right, that's all I need for those cakes for Friday.' She closed the cupboard door, swept the bags under the sink unit. 'Who was that?' There was no avid curiosity, just a need to ensure she knew who was who. She moved into the other room, only half-listening.

'Roberta Smiley. She came off her horse, so I helped her home. Nice girl. We've an invite to dinner.'

'Oh?' There was the sound of papers being shuffled about. 'I'm sure I left my list here somewhere.' A pause, before she came back into the kitchen. 'Dinner, you say. When?'

'Friday. At the Manor. Dress up job.'

'Don't think Friday's a good day. The Church Bazaar, I shan't get done till gone six. Still, if you want, I'll try and get

finished early. Right, I'm going to eat.' Not, 'Would you like to have dinner,' he noticed, which would have been nice. Andrew spun round and retreated to his office. She wouldn't care. Sitting down at his desk in front of the computer, he stared at the screen saver. 'Worthy Accountancy Services' floated by in front of its background of blue sky. The business was good, no doubt over that, but the domestic day to day monotony was driving him to desperation. How could he inspire Samantha to return to her vivacious former self? Take her away? Move? He couldn't see how he could change the way in which he looked after her. She had everything she wanted, within reason. The house was fine, the garden tidy. Okay, she moaned about the height of the shrubs occasionally, but she'd also moan if he cut them down. They did manage to get out together every now and again, but it always had to dovetail into her frenetic social calendar. Like tonight, after a committee meeting that would no doubt work its interminable way through a stuffy agenda and get next to nowhere, she'd come home and treat him to a half hour diatribe on how inefficient everyone was, that she would have to do this that and the other because no one else would, and so it went on. He thumped the desk and the screen leapt into life, the page telling him what work was still to do. Well, get on with it, he thought. Not a lot else. He'd eat when he'd finished.

About an hour and a half later, he'd broken the back of the end of the year calculations for one of his latest clients, an internet vegetable marketing company; knocked out a preliminary balance sheet and finalised two other quarterly accounts for the more regular clients. Time for a break and he stretched, climbed off his chair, mooched into the kitchen and found half the pizza Samantha had left. It would have to do; at least he'd had a nice lunch.

Once having eaten, he dropped into his chair in the lounge and vainly tried to get interested in a television programme. Never much to stretch the mind these days, he surmised, idly hopping from channel to channel. Blowed if he was going to spend money on satellite telly, so much of it was either repeats

or sport. Even the new digital Freeview system had its limitations. Bored, he cracked open a can of beer from the fridge and thought of Roberta: 'I bet she's not watching telly' - and pondered on how she did pass her time, all on her own. It would be very pleasant to have some good company and stimulating conversation for a change. When Samantha was at home she was always on the go, baking, ironing, sorting out her papers, hardly ever sat with him, let alone showed him any affection, not even the passing kiss. Putting his feet up on the low table, he finally found a passable film, albeit half way through, and inevitably, ten minutes later, fell asleep.

When Samantha did arrive home, she was in a foul mood. Apart from being talked down by that ponce of an overbearing Chairman, she'd spilt half-time coffee on her blouse - nothing unusual but annoying none the less - she'd had to take old Mrs Jones home and then some half-baked twit had nearly run her off the road at the junction. She slammed into the house and Andrew woke, with a headache.

'Sleeping in front of the telly again? I don't know how you can stand it. I'm going to bed. Turn off the lights.' And she was gone, thumping up the stairs. 'Oh God, what a disaster,' he thought and winced at the prospect of climbing into bed with her in that sort of mood. He waited until silence reigned, gave it another ten minutes, and crept upstairs. Gentle snoring sounds suggested she'd gone to sleep, thank goodness. He undressed carefully, slid gently into the bed and doused the bedside light. He might have read for a while, but he had some care for her, in that the light might have eventually disturbed her slumber. Could have been worse, but it could also have been a damn sight better if she'd been in the right mood. The thought of what should end the day between loving couples manifested itself in physical stirrings and he contemplated some exploration, but discretion or the knowledge a rebuff was worse than no attempt at all gave him second thoughts. He closed his eyes and called it a day.