RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Water's Lovely

Ruth Rendell

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About the Book

‘Weeks went by when Ismay never thought of it at all. Then something would bring it back or it would return in a dream. The dream began in the same way. She and her mother would be climbing the stairs, following Heather’s lead through the bedroom to what was on the other side, not a bathroom in the dream but a chamber floored and walled in marble. In the middle of it was a glassy lake. The white thing in the water floated towards her, its face submerged, and her mother said, absurdly, “Don’t look!”’

The dead man was Ismay’s stepfather, Guy. Now, nine years on, she and her sister, Heather, still lived in the same house in Clapham. But it had been divided into two self-contained flats. Their mother lived upstairs with her sister, Pamela. And the bathroom, where Guy had drowned, had been demolished.

Ismay and Heather get on well. They always have. They never discuss the changes to the house, still less what happened that August day. But now, with painful inevitability, hidden truths start to emerge.

About the Author

Ruth Rendell was an exceptional crime writer, and will be remembered as a legend in her own lifetime. Her ground-breaking debut novel, *From Doon With Death*, was first published in 1964 and introduced readers to her enduring and popular detective, Inspector Reginald Wexford.

With worldwide sales of approximately 20 million copies, Rendell was a regular *Sunday Times* bestseller. Her sixty bestselling novels include police procedurals, some of which have been successfully adapted for TV, stand-alone psychological mysteries, and a third strand of crime novels under the pseudonym Barbara Vine.

Rendell won numerous awards, including the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 1990. In 2013 she was awarded the Crime Writers' Association Cartier Diamond Dagger for sustained excellence in crime writing. In 1996 she was awarded the CBE, and in 1997 became a Life Peer.

Ruth Rendell died in May 2015.

Also by Ruth Rendell

OMNIBUSES:

COLLECTED SHORT STORIES
WEXFORD: AN OMNIBUS
THE SECOND WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE THIRD WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE FOURTH WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE FIFTH WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THREE CASES FOR CHIEF INSPECTOR WEXFORD
THE RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS
THE SECOND RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS
THE THIRD RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS

CHIEF INSPECTOR WEXFORD NOVELS:

FROM DOON WITH DEATH
A NEW LEASE OF DEATH
WOLF TO THE SLAUGHTER
THE BEST MAN TO DIE
A GUILTY THING SURPRISED
NO MORE DYING THEN
MURDER BEING ONCE DONE
SOME LIE AND SOME DIE
SHAKE HANDS FOR EVER
A SLEEPING LIFE
PUT ON BY CUNNING
THE SPEAKER OF MANDARIN
AN UNKINDNESS OF RAVENS
THE VEILED ONE
KISSING THE GUNNER'S DAUGHTER
SIMISOLA
ROAD RAGE
HARM DONE
THE BABES IN THE WOOD
END IN TEARS

SHORT STORIES:

THE FALLEN CURTAIN
MEANS OF EVIL
THE FEVER TREE
THE NEW GIRL FRIEND
THE COPPER PEACOCK
BLOOD LINES

PIRANHA TO SCURFY

NOVELLAS:

HEARTSTONES
THE THIEF

NON-FICTION:

RUTH RENDELL'S SUFFOLK
RUTH RENDELL'S ANTHOLOGY OF THE MURDEROUS MIND

NOVELS:

TO FEAR A PAINTED DEVIL
VANITY DIES HARD
THE SECRET HOUSE OF DEATH
ONE ACROSS, TWO DOWN
THE FACE OF TRESPASS
A DEMON IN MY VIEW
A JUDGEMENT IN STONE
MAKE DEATH LOVE ME
THE LAKE OF DARKNESS
MASTER OF THE MOOR
THE KILLING DOLL
THE TREE OF HANDS
LIVE FLESH
TALKING TO STRANGE MEN
THE BRIDESMAID
GOING WRONG
THE CROCODILE BIRD
THE KEYS TO THE STREET
A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES
ADAM AND EVE AND PINCH ME
THE ROTTWEILER
THIRTEEN STEPS DOWN

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Chapter 1

WEEKS WENT BY when Ismay never thought of it at all. Then something would bring it back or it would return in a dream. The dream began in the same way. She and her mother would be climbing the stairs, following Heather's lead through the bedroom to what was on the other side, not a bathroom in the dream but a chamber floored and walled in marble. In the middle of it was a glassy lake. The white thing in the water floated towards her, its face submerged, and her mother said, absurdly, 'Don't look!' Because the dead thing was a man and was naked and she was a girl of fifteen. But she had looked and in the dreams she looked again, but at Guy's drowned face. She had looked at the dead face and though she would forget from time to time what she had seen, it always came back, the fear still there in the dead eyes, the nostrils dilated to inhale water, not air.

Heather showed no fear, no emotion of any kind. She stood with her arms hanging by her side. Her dress was wet, clinging to her breasts. No one spoke then, neither in the reality nor in the dreams, neither of them said a word until their mother fell on her knees and began crying and laughing and babbling nonsense.

When she came home the house was a different place. She had known, of course, that it would be two self-contained flats, the upper one for her mother and Pamela, the lower one for her and Heather, two pairs of sisters, two

generations represented. In her last term at university, four hundred miles away in Scotland, what she hadn't understood was that part of the house would disappear.

It was Pamela's idea, though Pamela didn't know why. She knew no more of what had happened than the rest of the world knew. In innocence and well-meaning, she had planned and carried out these drastic changes. She showed Ismay the ground-floor flat and then she took her upstairs.

'I'm not sure how much Beatrix understands,' she said, opening the door to what had been the principal bedroom, the room they had walked through to find the drowned man. 'I can't tell how much she remembers. God knows if she even realises it's the same room.'

I can hardly realise, thought Ismay. The shock of it silenced her. She looked around her almost fearfully. It was one room now. The door to the bathroom had been – where? The French windows to the balcony were gone, replaced by a single glass door. The whole place looked larger, nearer to the dream room, yet less spacious.

'It's better this way, isn't it, Issy?'

'Oh, yes, yes. It's just that it was a shock.' Perhaps it would have been better to sell the house and move. But how else would she and Heather afford a flat to share? 'Has Heather seen it?'

'She loves all the changes. I don't know when I've seen her so enthusiastic about anything.' Pamela showed her the two bedrooms that had once been hers and Heather's, the new kitchen, the new bathroom. At the top of the stairs she paused, holding on to the newel post and turning her eyes on Ismay almost pleadingly. 'It's nine years ago, Issy, or is it ten?'

'Nine. Coming up to nine.'

'I thought changing things like this would help you finally to put it behind you. We couldn't go on keeping that room shut up. How long is it since anyone went in there? All those nine years, I suppose.'

‘I don’t think about it much any more,’ she lied.

‘Sometimes I think Heather’s forgotten it.’

‘Perhaps I can forget it now,’ said Ismay and she went downstairs to find her mother who was in the garden with Heather.

Forgetting isn’t an act of will. She hadn’t forgotten but that conversation with Pamela, that tour of her old home made new, was a watershed for her. Though she dreamed of drowned Guy that night, gradually her mindset changed and she felt the load she carried ease. She stopped asking herself what had happened on that hot August afternoon. Where had Heather been? What exactly had Heather done – if anything? Was it possible anyone else had been in the house? Probing, wondering, speculating had been with her for nine years and at last she asked herself why. Suppose she found out, what could she do with the truth she had discovered? She wasn’t going to share with Heather, live with Heather, to protect her from anything, still less ‘save’ her. It was just convenient. They were sisters and close. She loved Heather and Heather certainly loved her.

She and Heather downstairs, her mother and Pamela on the top floor. The first time Ismay saw her mother in the new living room, in the corner she had made for herself with her radio, her footstool, the handbag she carried everywhere, she watched her to see if her vague dazed glance wandered to the end of the room that was most radically changed. It never did. It really was as if Beatrix failed to understand this was the same room. Heather went up there with her when Pamela invited the two of them for drinks and it was as Pamela said. She behaved as if she had forgotten, even going up to the new glass door and opening it to check if it was raining. She closed it and came back, pausing to look at a picture Pamela had newly hung on the wall where the towel rail used to be and Beatrix’s bowl of coloured soaps had stood. Ironically, the only thing to

remind you it had once been a bathroom was that picture, a Bonnard print of a nude drying herself after a bath.

If they could forget or dismiss it or accept it, whichever it was, she must too. She had. She was almost proud of herself for doing what people said you had to do: move on. The next time she was up there with her mother, sitting with her while Pamela was out, she got up and walked across the polished floor, stepped over the two rugs, stood in front of the table where the shower cabinet used to be and picked up a glass paperweight patterned with roses. Holding it up to the light, she felt her heart beating faster. The beat steadied, became rhythmic and slow and, with deliberation, she turned to look at the place where Guy had died.

Beatrix had turned on her radio, had contorted her body as she always did, leaning to the left, so that she was almost resting her head on the shelf where the radio was, her ear pressed against it. If she noticed where Ismay was she gave no sign of it, managing a distracted smile when her daughter smiled at her.

Not long after that she found her job in public relations and Heather hers in catering. They got on well, they always had. Besides, long ago and almost unconsciously, Ismay had appointed herself, not Heather's guardian, never that, but her companion. Not exactly to watch over her, not in the commonplace phrase to 'keep an eye on her', but just to be there and to see. Each time she came home, each time they met during those four years apart, she had watched and enquired and listened to what Heather had to say. She never thought much about the future, the inevitable separation which must come one day. Must come or be avoided at a terrible cost to both of them.

Living together, they never discussed the changes to the house, still less what had happened on that August day when she was fifteen and Heather was two years younger.

If they had, Ismay would have had to ask the question she had never asked. Each of them paid her share of the rent to Beatrix. It was what she lived on.

A year went by and half another. Ismay fell in love. To Pam, who listened and to her mother who never seemed to care or even hear, she described it as falling fathoms deep in love. There had never been a passion like her passion for Andrew Campbell-Sedge. Heather also listened but had nothing to tell her in return. Heather's love affairs, if she had any, must have been brief, superficial and lukewarm. In Andrew's presence she hardly spoke and Ismay knew why. She was silent with the people she disliked but there was more to it than that.

Andrew looked like Guy. He belonged to the same type. He might have been Guy's younger brother. Was that why she loved him and Heather didn't love him? The night she understood that, Ismay had the dream again but it was Andrew's face she saw under the clear, pale-green water.

Chapter 2

MARION WAS THERE when Edmund came home from work. That was the second time this week. His mother said, ‘Marion kindly did my shopping for me so I asked her to stay and eat with us. I knew you’d be pleased.’

Did she? Why did she? As far as he could remember he had never expressed an opinion of Marion, apart from saying some months past that it was a mystery to him why women dyed their hair that unnatural shade of dark crimson. She smiled at him and sat at the table, starting to chat in her lively way about all the old people she visited and loved to help – ‘We’ll all be old one day, won’t we?’ – the National Health Service and her late mother’s deferred hip operation, sedatives and analgesics and alternative medicine. She thought it was his ‘field’, she aimed to please him. Later on he would have to walk her to the station. It was only at the bottom of the hill but he couldn’t let her go alone through the dark streets. She would chat all the way about how marvellous his mother was in spite of her health problems.

His mother had produced avocado with shrimps, followed by spaghetti carbonara. ‘Absolutely delicious, Irene,’ said Marion, no mean cook herself in her own estimation. She had brought a Bakewell tart with her as a gift. ‘If I shut my eyes I might be in Bologna.’

I wish you were, thought Edmund. So it was ‘Irene’ now. Last time she was here they had still been on ‘Mrs Litton’ terms. Marion’s hair was redder and darker than it had

been at the beginning of the week and her little marmoset face more brightly painted. He had never known a woman be such a fidget. She couldn't sit still for five minutes but was up and down, bouncing about on her little stick legs and her kitten heels.

'You mustn't think you have to come with me,' she said to him when she had served and cleared away the coffee. Another first time.

'It's no trouble,' said his mother as if she were doing it herself. 'Suppose something happened. He'd never forgive himself.'

She smiled. She made a conspiratorial face at Marion, a sort of can't-you-see-he's-longing-to-go-with-you face. And then he knew. Marion was intended for him. His mother's chosen present for him. Not from the first probably, not from when they first knew each other a year or two years back, but for perhaps six months. Like a fool he hadn't seen it coming. He saw it now. She was older than he but maybe by no more than five or six years. She was to be his girlfriend, then his fiancée, in a year or two his wife, a wife who would happily share a house with his mother.

Desperate situations call for desperate measures. He walked Marion down the hill, listening with only half an ear to her prattle about his mother's arthritis and her courage (as if Irene were ninety instead of sixty-two), then the latest doings of old Mr Hussein and old Mrs Reinhardt. All the while he was thinking what steps to take. Outside the station, as she thanked him for his escort, she lifted her face quite close to his. Did she expect a kiss? He stepped back, said goodnight and left her.

'Such a sweet woman,' said his mother. 'Girl, I should say.' She paused to let this sink in. 'We've got a new neighbour. I saw him move in today. A Mr Fenix. Marion says he paid over a million for that house and she should know.'

Next day, at the hospice, he reviewed his fellow nurses. The women were all married or living with a boyfriend. At his mid-morning break he went downstairs to the catering department, for a slice of gingerbread or a piece of strudel to go with his coffee. The Jean Langholm Hospice was known for the high standard of its food. As Michelle, one of the cooks, said, ‘Let’s face it, folks come here to die. The least you can do is make their last meals cordon bleu.’

She was helping Diane prepare vegetables, cleaning broccoli and scrubbing carrots. Heather, the chef, was making wafer-thin pancakes for lunch. Edmund went up to Heather, as he sometimes did, to ask her how she was and tell her about Mr Warriner, a cancer patient on his ward in whom she had shown an interest. She simply smiled at the first enquiry and nodded at the news of Mr Warriner. She was a quiet girl and plain-faced, calm and reposeful, sturdy and full-bodied without being fat. She always looked as if she had just had a bath and washed her hair. Her eyes were the blue of willow pattern china and her beautiful thick fair hair cut in a short bob with a fringe. She asked him if he had come for his cake and could she offer him an almond slice or a piece of Battenberg. Edmund chose the Battenberg cake, then he said, ‘Would you like to come out for a drink one evening?’

She was surprised to be asked. He could see that. ‘All right,’ she said.

‘Well, this evening?’

She didn’t have to think. She stared at him. ‘If you like.’

‘What time do you finish here?’

‘Six.’

‘I’ll come down for you at six.’

It would mean hanging about upstairs for an hour but never mind. He could have a chat to Mr Warriner about his son and his dog and his once-splendid stamp collection. However awful the evening might be, however many long silences and glum stares, it wouldn’t be Marion and her

blether. It wouldn't be a step into the trap his mother and Marion were setting for him.

'What do you think,' said Ismay. 'Heather has a boyfriend.'

Andrew, pouring wine, was so astonished that he let the glass overflow. Ismay ran and fetched a towel from the bathroom. He laughed and kissed her. 'Who is this hero?'

'Oh, Andrew, that's not kind. She *is* my sister. I love her if you don't.'

'I'm sorry, sweetheart. I suppose I judge the way she's likely to treat other guys by the way she treats me. She's a mistress of the persistent silence. It would matter less if she didn't live with you.' Andrew handed her a glass, sat down beside her and lit a cigarette. Ismay disapproved of everyone's smoking except Andrew. He smoked, she thought, with the elegance of an actor in a Hollywood film of the thirties. 'D'you know,' he said, 'I think I deserve some credit for actually sticking around once I'd learned that little gorgon I found ensconced on this sofa was *your* sister and *your* flatmate. All right, don't be hurt, you know I love you. Who is he? Tell me about him.'

'He's a nurse.'

'You're joking. You mean a male nurse?'

'Of course he's a male nurse if he's a man, Andrew. He's a nurse in the Jean Langholm Hospice where Heather works.'

'That figures. Have you met him?'

'Not yet. He's called Edmund Litton and apparently he's got about as many nursing qualifications as you can get. He lives in West Hampstead and he's thirty-three.'

'Just how do you manage to get all this info out of a brick wall? I can barely get a word out of her. Quite a contrast to how you prattle on. Frankly, I sometimes wonder if she really is your sister. Maybe she's a changeling. You're so lovely and she's no oil painting, is she?'

‘No *what*?’

‘Something my grandmama says. I rather like it. It’s so graphic. There’s just one more thing I want to know. Will he marry her? Will this courageous paramedic marry her and take her away from here so that you and I can move in together as I’ve been trying to do this past year?’

‘Oh, Andrew, I shouldn’t think so,’ said Ismay. ‘He lives with his mother.’

It was quite a big house, of mid-thirties vintage. Irene Litton would never have expected her son to live with her in a flat or a small place. Or so she told herself. But surely, when you had a four-bedroomed house at your disposal, it was simply imprudent not to occupy it – well, prudently. Edmund might have all those certificates and diplomas but he didn’t earn very much. Now if he had been a doctor, as his father and she had wanted … As things were, it would have been simply foolish for him to take out a mortgage on a flat on his salary. Of course, ignoring how much she loved the house in Chudleigh Hill, how it had been her home for thirty-six years, her home she had come to as a bride, she could have sold it and divided the proceeds with Edmund. He would never have allowed that. He had too much respect for her feelings and her memories.

Besides, she wouldn’t live long. She wouldn’t make old bones. She had always known that from the time Edmund was born and she had had such a dreadful time, thirty-eight hours in labour. They had gone to her husband and asked him whom they should save, his wife or his unborn child. Of course he had said his wife. As it turned out, after a nightmare of agony, when she thought she was dying, the child was born and she was still alive. But from that moment she had known her constitution wasn’t strong. It couldn’t be when she had so many things the matter with her: migraines that laid her low for days on end, a bad back Edmund said was neither arthritis nor scoliosis – but he

wasn’t a doctor – M.E. that made her perpetually tired, acid indigestion, a numbness in her hands and feet she knew was the start of Parkinson’s and, lately, panic attacks that frightened her nearly to death.

She hadn’t expected to live to fifty. By a miracle she had and past that, but it couldn’t go on much longer. When she died, in two or three years’ time, the house and everything in it would be Edmund’s. Marion’s too, she had hoped, but that was not to be. Well, young people had to make their own choices. And their own mistakes. She hoped, for his sake, Edmund hadn’t made a mistake in picking this Heather. He had brought her home to Chudleigh Hill. She couldn’t exactly say he had brought her home to meet his mother. No doubt he was shy of doing that, the girl was gauche, to say the least, and with a disconcerting stare out of over-bright blue eyes. You could say she had *rude* eyes, thought Irene, pleased with the phrase. Irene had met the pair of them coming downstairs. It was the middle of a Saturday afternoon, so there was no question of their having been upstairs doing anything they shouldn’t have been. Edmund wouldn’t do that. Not before he was married. Or not perhaps, Irene thought bravely, moving with the times, before he was engaged.

‘This is Heather, Mother,’ Edmund said.

‘How do you do?’

The girl said ‘Hello, Mrs Litton’ in the sort of tone too casual for Irene’s liking.

Nice hair, thought Irene, but otherwise nothing much to look at. ‘Can I get you some tea?’

‘We’re going to the cinema,’ the girl said.

‘How nice. What are you going to see?’

‘*The Manchurian Candidate*.’

‘Oh, I’d love to see that,’ said Irene. ‘Nicole Kidman’s in it, isn’t she?’

‘I don’t think so.’ Heather turned from Edmund to face her with a smile. ‘Will you excuse us, Mrs Litton? We have

to go. Come on, Ed, or we'll be late.'

Ed! No one had ever called him that. She couldn't help thinking how different Marion would have been. For one thing, Marion would certainly have asked her to join them when she had said she would like to see the film. It was only polite. Come to that, Edmund might have asked. A twinge gripped her in the region of her waist and she tasted hot bile in her throat. She wondered if she could possibly have gallstones. When Edmund came home she would ask him and he would know, even though he wasn't a doctor.

Waking in the night after Andrew had gone and unable to go back to sleep, Ismay lay alone in the dark thinking about her sister. Was there a chance this man might marry Heather? She hadn't even considered the possibility until Andrew suggested it. Edmund and Heather had been going out together for less than a month. But Heather seemed to like him, to be always out somewhere with him. Ismay had never known her to be absent from the flat so much since they came to live here. And though Heather had had a boyfriend or two while at catering college, nothing, as far as Ismay knew, had been remotely serious.

She got up to go to the bathroom. Dawn had come and with it the grey light that is the precursor of sunrise. Heather had left her door open and Ismay stopped to look into the room at her sister lying fast asleep. Her beautiful hair lay on the pillow like a gold silk cushion, her strong and capable right hand spread out beside it. It was early days to think about Edmund marrying her but on the other hand, there had never before been a situation like this. Ismay admitted to herself that she had somehow taken it for granted that Heather would never have a serious relationship, let alone marry. When she asked herself why, she came up with an unsatisfactory answer. Because she was Heather, because she's not like other girls, because

she’s not attractive to men. Yet she must be attractive to Edmund.

Of course, she had never committed herself to staying with Heather, the two of them sharing for ever. There would have been no point in that. Heather was an independent person, quite capable of looking after herself, living alone or, she supposed, being a wife. She shouldn’t even be thinking about her the way Andrew did, as someone vaguely incapacitated. She could separate herself from Heather and they could be like any other normal sisters who loved each other, of course, but weren’t bound together …

It was the night, that was what it was, five o’clock in the morning, a mad sad time. She went back to bed and lay there, her eyes open in the pale-grey light and seeing at last that this was nothing to do with the time of day or wanting to live with Andrew or Heather’s temperament. It was to do with what Heather had done twelve years ago. Must have done, surely beyond a doubt had done.

No one knew but the three of them, herself, her mother and Heather. The knowledge had driven her mother over the edge into the shadow world of schizophrenia. They had discussed Heather’s involvement, Heather’s guilt, she and her mother, but between themselves, never with Heather. Guy might still be alive, be on the other side of the world, lost or vanished, for all Heather ever spoke of him or his death or even, it seemed, remembered him. But he was dead and due to Heather. Sometimes Ismay felt she knew it as if she had witnessed the act and sometimes that she knew it because there was no other possibility.

If Heather married Edmund Litton, should he be told? That was the great question. Could she let this apparently nice, good, intelligent man – or, come to that, any man at all – take on Heather without knowing what she had done? But if he knew would he take her on? I love my sister, she whispered to herself in the dark. Whatever Andrew says,

she is lovable. I can’t bear to hurt her, deprive her of happiness, cut her off from life, like they used to shut girls up in convents, just because … But, wait a minute, because she *drowned* someone?

She heard Heather get up and move very softly into the kitchen. Should she hand over her stewardship of Heather, half-hearted though it had been, to Edmund? It’s early days, she told herself, but she couldn’t get back to sleep.

Chapter 3

UNLESS YOU ARE very young, it is difficult to have sex if you haven't a home of your own or the money to provide a temporary refuge. Edmund had had no sex for five years now. The last time had been with an agency nurse at the hospice Christmas party in a room full of washbasins known as the 'sluice'. And that had been a one-off. Since going out with Heather he had looked back on his largely sex-free twenties with shame and incredulity. Those were the best years of a man's life as far as desire and potency were concerned, and he had let them pass by because he balked at telling his mother he was bringing back a girl for the night. Regret was pointless. It wasn't too late and he intended, this evening, to tell his mother he would be going away for the weekend – and why.

For some time now he had been standing up to her. Long before he met Heather he went home for a meal with his friend, the hospice palliative care doctor, Ian Dell, and saw Ian with his own mother. He had never imagined that his strong-minded decisive friend could be so enfeebled and conciliatory, and under the rule of a parent, as Ian was. Mrs Dell was a little old crone (as Edmund put it unkindly to himself) quite unlike Irene Litton, but their dictatorial manner was similar. It seemed to him that Ian yielded in almost everything to Mrs Dell, even apologising to Edmund afterwards for having refused – very gently – to take a day off from the hospice next day to drive her to see her sister in Rickmansworth.

‘I expect you think I should have taken her,’ he said. ‘I do have time off owing to me and we aren’t that busy at the moment, are we? But I suppose I felt, rather selfishly, that it might be the thin end of the wedge. I’ll make it up to her. I’ll take her for a day out somewhere at the weekend.’

In Ian, Edmund had seen himself mirrored. He must change. If he failed to take a stand now when he was only a little over thirty, it would be too late. Although he and Heather had never discussed his mother, somehow it was Heather’s presence in his life that helped him. Gave him confidence and cheered his heart. So when Irene told him – told, not asked him – to come with her to his aunt and uncle in Ealing on the first free Saturday he’d had for a month, he took a deep breath and said no, he’d be busy. The ensuing argument became acrimonious and culminated in his mother having a panic attack. But it is the first step that counts, as Edmund kept telling himself, and after that things gradually got easier. He would be able to tell her about the planned weekend and its purpose and, he thought, screwing up his nerve, she would just have to get on with it.

When he first asked Heather out for a drink with him he had hardly thought of their relationship as coming to much. A few weeks, he gave it, and no sex because there never was. Besides, Heather hadn’t really had much attraction for him. She was a better prospect than white-faced, skinny, crimson-haired Marion, but almost anyone would have been. Now, though, they had been out for drinks, three meals, two cinemas, one theatre and to a food-through-the-ages exhibition she had been keen on, and he looked at her with new eyes.

One evening she said to him, ‘I’m a silent person. I talk to my sister but not much to others. I can talk to you.’

He was enormously touched. ‘I’m glad.’

‘It’s easy with you because you don’t say stupid things. It’s nice.’

He saw her home to Clapham. When he didn't leave her at Embankment but came the whole way, she said, 'You're so kind to me. I don't much like walking home from the station on my own.'

'Of course I'm coming with you,' he said and when they began to walk along the edge of the Common, he took her hand.

It was a warm hand with a strong clasp. He looked into her face under the lamplight and saw her eyes fixed on him, large blue eyes, opaque and cloudy as the glaze on pottery. Then there were the other markers, more obvious to any man, her full breasts and rounded hips, her plump lips and that hair, that glossy, dense, radiant hair whose colour varied from flaxen through cornfield to eighteen-carat gold. She never wasted words but when she did speak her voice was soft and low, and her rare smiles lit her face and made her pretty.

The house where she lived was much bigger than he expected, a detached house in a row of others like it but the only one with a glazed-in walkway from the gates to the steps and with stone pineapples on the gateposts. Lights were on upstairs and down.

'My sister Ismay and I have the ground floor, and my mother and her sister the top.' She stopped at the foot of the steps, keeping hold of his hand. 'Ismay and her boyfriend', she said softly, 'will be away next weekend.'

'Can I take you out on Friday?'

She lifted her face and in the gleaming half-dark he thought he had never seen anyone look so trusting. He brought his mouth to hers and kissed her the way he'd been kissing her these past few weeks but something new in her response made him ardent, passionate, breathless when their faces parted. She held him tightly.

'Heather,' he said. 'Darling Heather.'

'Come for the weekend.'

He nodded. 'I'll look forward to it so much.'

Edmund said to his mother, ‘I shall be away for the weekend, back on Sunday.’

They had just sat down to eat. Irene lifted her first forkful, set it down again. ‘You never go away for the weekend.’

‘No, it’s time I started.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘To Clapham.’

‘You don’t have to go away to go to Clapham. Clapham’s in London. Whatever you’re doing in Clapham you can do it in the daytime and come back here to sleep.’

Strength came to him from somewhere. From Heather? ‘I am going to spend the weekend in Heather’s flat.’

Edmund continued to eat. His mother had stopped. She shook her head infinitesimally from side to side, said, ‘Oh, Edmund, Edmund, I didn’t think you were that sort of man.’

He was still wary of her, but he contrasted how he now was and how he had been. There was a world of difference. His efforts had paid off and there was no doubt that now he sometimes got amusement out of their confrontations. ‘What sort of man, Mother?’

‘Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean.’

‘I am going away for the weekend with my girlfriend, Mother. I don’t suppose you want me to go into details.’ It was the first time he had referred to Heather as his girlfriend. Doing so now seemed to bring him closer to her. ‘And now I’d like to finish my dinner.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t eat any more,’ Irene said, leaning back in her chair and taking deep breaths. ‘I feel rather unwell. It is probably the start of a migraine.’

Edmund wanted to say something on the lines of, ‘You always do feel ill when I say anything to cross you,’ or even, ‘It couldn’t be psychosomatic, could it?’ But he stayed silent, unwilling to argue further with her or defend himself (God forbid). Of course she would revert to the matter again – and again.

She did so at the moment he laid his knife and fork diagonally across his empty plate. ‘I shall be all alone in this house.’

‘Unless you can get Marion to stay.’

‘It’s hard when you’re my age and not strong.’

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘you have a good neighbour in Mr Fenix next door and good neighbours opposite. You have a landline and a mobile phone. You are only sixty-two and there is nothing wrong with you.’ Even six months ago he couldn’t have summoned the strength to say that.

‘Nothing wrong with me!’ The words were repeated on a note of ironic laughter. ‘It is extraordinary how one’s good little children can grow up so callous. When you were first put into my arms, a tiny child, after all I went through to give you life, I never dreamed you would repay my suffering with this kind of treatment, never.’

‘I’ll get Marion on the phone for you, shall I, and you can ask her?’

‘Oh, no, no. I can’t become dependent on strangers. I shall have to bear it alone. Please God I won’t be ill.’

In the event, Edmund left for Clapham on Friday but only after more battles. Irene ‘went down’ with a cold the evening before. It was a real cold. Unlike acid indigestion, which needs only one’s word for it, sneezes and a running nose cannot be faked. Irene pointed out that it was only three weeks since she had had her last cold. It was a well-known fact that ‘cold upon cold’ was the precursor of pneumonia. She had had it as a child as the result of a series of colds, *double* pneumonia.

‘You aren’t going to get pneumonia, Mother,’ said Edmund, the nurse.

Discouraging whisky toddies, he made her a honey-and-lemon drink and advised aspirin every four hours. ‘You’re not a doctor,’ she said, as she so often did. ‘I ought to be having antibiotics.’

‘A cold is a virus and antibiotics don’t work against viruses.’

‘It will be a virus all right when I get viral pneumonia.’

Irene Litton was a tall, well-built woman, having much the same sort of figure as Heather Sealand. Edmund had noticed this and refused to draw the psychologist’s conclusion, that he was attracted by women who looked like his mother. In any case, the resemblance ended there for Irene’s hair was dark, barely yet touched with grey, and though English through and through, she had much the same features as Maria Callas: large, aquiline, striking. She was aware of this herself and had been heard to say that she might have had the same operatic success if she had only been able to have her voice trained. She dressed in draped or trailing clothes in strong jewel colours, wine-red, sapphire, deep-green or purple, mostly with fringes, hung with strings of beads she made herself, and she moved slowly, straight-backed, head held high. Her usual good health suited her type and she was at her worst when red-nosed and sniffing.

Marion noticed at once and poured out sympathy. She had arrived just before Edmund left for the weekend – timed her arrival, he thought, for he was sure that his mother had invited her, in spite of her avowals that she had not. That she knew where he was going and with whom he was also pretty sure of, for while they were alone together in the hall, before she danced in to see Irene, she gave him a look of deep reproach, half smiling, yet sad. ‘I brought some of my own-make fairy cakes,’ she said. ‘Fairy cakes have come right back into fashion, you know. They’re such comforting food and she’ll need comfort.’

When he had walked down the path and let himself out of the garden gate, he looked back to see them both watching him from the bay window. Those women were sure to make him the principal subject of their conversation, thoughtless, immoral, unfilial, callous and not

a doctor. His ears ought to be burning all the evening. He was determined not to let thinking of it blight his weekend and it didn't.

Letting fall the beige damask curtain and returning to the fireside – a realistic-looking gas fire of smouldering yet everlasting coals and logs with flickering flames – Marion bustled about, feeling Irene's forehead, refilling her water carafe, fetching echinacea drops and cough lozenges, and finally thrusting a thermometer into her mouth.

'You'd have thought Edmund would have done all this,' said Marion.

'Hmm-mm-hmm-hmm.'

'After all, he is a nurse.'

'Mm-hmm-hmm,' more vehemently.

The thermometer reading was normal.

'It can't be!'

'Maybe there's something wrong with it. I'll try again later, shall I? Or shall I run out and see if I can get another one from the all-night pharmacist? Or I could run home and fetch mine.'

'Would you, Marion? You're so good to me. I'm beginning to think of you as my daughter, you know. Or – dare I say it? – my might-have-been daughter-in-law.'

Marion ran to the station, changed her mind and ran home through the winding streets to the Finchley Road. She ran everywhere, just as she talked all the time. Though she had made an attempt at courting him, Edmund's defection hadn't troubled her as much as Irene believed. What she wanted was not a young man's desire but the devotion and admiration of elderly people with money. As well as Irene, she had old Mr Hussein and old Mrs Reinhardt, her sights on a couple of others and she had had old Mrs Pringle, only old Mrs Pringle had died last year. If she hadn't bequeathed her enormous house in Fitzjohn's Avenue to Marion, she had left her a large sum of money and some very nice jewellery. This had enabled Marion to

buy the ground floor and basement flat of the house in Lithos Road she now entered to find a thermometer. Since she was obsessively neat – a place for everything and everything in its place – she found it at once in the bathroom cabinet on the shelf next to the brown bottle of morphine sulphate, and she skipped back to get the tube this time, one stop to West Hampstead and Irene.

Heather would be shy and perhaps nervous, Edmund had believed. She might even be a virgin. As he made his way by Jubilee Line and Northern Line to Clapham, the joyful anticipation he had felt earlier in the week began to fade and he wondered if she was so inexperienced that he would have to – no, surely not, teach her. The idea was enough to chill him in highly undesirable ways. For one thing, he was sure he was incapable of educating a woman in the art of love and for another, suppose she was unresponsive and frightened. He told himself, as the train came in to Clapham South, that he wasn't in love with her – maybe it would be easier if he were – and that if this split them up rather than consolidating their relationship, it wouldn't be the end of the world. There were other women to be found. Marion wasn't the only alternative.

But as he climbed the steps under the glass canopy he remembered the kiss she had given him and that look of utter trust when she took his hand. Here at the top the lower doorbell said, I. and H. Sealand, the upper one, Sealand and Viner. He pressed the bell and as he waited found quite suddenly that he was longing to see her, that when she answered the door he would take her in his arms.

Things were very different from what he expected while in the train. Once he was over his amazement, he found himself with a passionate partner, enthusiastic and uninhibited. Not silent and calm as she was when they were out together or she was busy in the kitchens of the hospice, but yielding yet active, sweetly tireless and