

## The Stile

We're walking along the field on a narrow, well trodden path that hugs the hedgerows. Our pace is slower than I'm used to and we have to go single file. I'm fond of striding out, the men in my walking group are hard pressed to keep up with me. They raise their eyebrows at each other and say I'm trying to prove something.

Even so it's obviously too fast.

"Whoa, slow down, Jean!" I hear his wheezy gasps behind me, every breath squeezed out by an enormous effort.

"I'm not as young as I was, you know."

"None of us are, Dad."

My voice is irritable, peevish but I'm gripped by an almost exhilarating feeling of power. From here we can see the sweep of the field, behind us are the bluebell woods from where a bird is calling, the only sign of life, not even, at this moment, a buzz of traffic. Just the two of us. The house is at the other end of a long lane. I could do anything. Who would know?

"Take him for a walk, Jean, please!."

We've gathered for my brother's fiftieth. My mother, pink and flustered, peeling, chopping, trying to prepare lunch for nine, had hissed desperately, "He won't keep out of my hair. Never lifts a finger but tells me what to do all the time." She stabbed her knife into a potato. "I've been cooking for sixty years, for heaven's sake!"

I've only come today for her. She'd cast a furtive glance over her shoulder.

"Let him hear, Mum". I wasn't so considerate. Or intimidated. "Serves him right".

He's become diminished of late, shrunken into himself. All his life he's been an upright man, a military man and now, with his stooped shoulders, wispy white hair and dragging leg he cuts a pathetic figure. Or would do if I could muster any pity.

I haven't been home for ten years. My lecturing work takes me abroad but that's an excuse. I meet Mum in town from time to time but rarely see my brother. Guilt, probably, as he helps shoulder the burden. For her sake. My childhood memories are tarnished and I hate watching how he crushes my mother especially since retirement forces him under her feet all day. Despite his frailty and all the puffing and blowing he shows no sign of mellowing. Who'd really care if anything happened to him? I can't think of one person

"How much further, Jean?"

The querulous voice has thinned. Difficult to imagine he ever barked orders across a barrack square. And at us.

He was echoing our childhood whimpers.

"Are we nearly there? I can't walk any more."

I think of my brother, the same six footer that, back at the house, is trying to crank life into the ancient lawn mower.

"Is it far, Daddy? Are we there yet?"

For answer Simon received a blow to the head that knocked him to the ground.

"Keep walking, son. Soldiers don't whine. You want to be a soldier, don't you?"

We tried pleading with my mother. "Do we have to go?" Her tight lips told us that she knew but she wouldn't, couldn't do anything. He hit her too. We'd heard them.

"We'll rest at the stile, Dad." I say now. "Not very far."

“I don’t think I can last much longer, Jean.” He tries to be jocular but I sense the unease. Sweat slips down his cheeks and veins lattice his forehead.

“Not without a rest, girl.”

“Nonsense, Dad”. I take pleasure in the words. “You were a soldier, remember?”

It has rained this morning and the ground is slippery. My father slithers on some leaves and grabs at a branch.

“You can stop at the stile, Dad.”

“If I make it.”

I despise his self-pity.

“You’ll make it.”

Already we can see the stile. It is higher than I remember, obviously new, an arrangement of clean-looking wooden planks at right-angles. In the old days less agile walkers could squeeze through a hole at the side. You can’t do that today-the stile slots cleanly into the gap in the barbed wire fence.

When he clutches at my sleeve I smell his tobacco breath. I want to shake him away but do nothing.

“I can’t get over that, Jean. You know I can’t.”

“If you don’t, Dad, we’ll have to retrace our steps.” This is a circular walk.

“It’s only ten minutes the other side.”

“I’ve got a gammy knee.” He proves the point by clutching it dramatically.

“I’m waiting for the op. Bloody N.H.S!”

The day Simon ‘wasted time’ watching a woodpecker he had to walk home barefoot. I tried to defend him and spent a day locked in my room. ‘Confined to barracks’. Then came the stile.

These days it would be called child abuse and there'd be people to ring, adults to confide in. If anybody then knew what was happening they didn't do anything. It would have been unthinkable, anyway. A man of my father's standing would be an exemplary father. Children needed discipline, after all.

I climb the new stile, the pale wood satisfyingly smooth beneath my fingers and stand looking down on my father. From this height he appears even more shrivelled.

His face grey, he leans against a tree. This is how we must have seemed to him, small, vulnerable, terrified.

"Bully!" I want to scream. "How do you like it?"

"Wait for me, girl!" he moans, without opening his eyes.

The word 'girl' rewinds the years.

"Look lively, girl! Come here, girl! Help your mother, girl!"

Always the hectoring tone, never an endearment or the slightest suggestion of pride or affection.

"Let it go!" I try to say to myself. Paul, my ex-husband said the same. "It happened," he would say, "but leave it behind. Move on."

I haven't been back to the stile in years. I couldn't bear to. I always made excuses when this walk is suggested. The trees may be thicker, the paths more defined but the smells and sounds are the same. I've only mentioned it to one or two close people. I was embarrassed by their horror.

"Forget it, Jean!" I can hear Paul's sympathetic but no-nonsense words again.

"If you don't your dad's the winner. You've got to get over it!"

Then we both saw the funny side of that remark and the clouds lifted for a while. But I never could forget and it put me off having my own children which didn't help the marriage.

This is a different stile, though. Perhaps that's a sign. My father's eyes are still closed. "You always were a headstrong little sod."

Does he remember? Perhaps he does.

"Thanks, Dad!"

We'd been black-berrying. Even today I never eat that fruit. I shudder when I see the green knobs appear at the beginning of summer to become pulpy purple before hitting the ground in soft, bloody splodges.

That day I was even more reluctant to go as I'd been invited to a party, a school friend's seventh. That's how young I was. But this Sunday was reserved for fruit picking, my mother would make and label jam all the following week and there was no question of deviating from the routine.

I stand on the other side of the stile now and beckon him on. He opens his eyes and struggles towards me.

From the house to the stile I had choked back the tears. On the way we had to pass the friend's house, and I watched the other girls in their frills and sashes playing in the front garden and I endured their half-pitying, half-curious stares as I trailed miserably after my father and brothers.

My father lifts a tremulous foot towards the step of the stile. He can't raise it high enough, he's not going to make it. I stand and watch.

The small girl that was me straggled behind all the way to the stile. I was last over it.

"Keep up, girl!" he bellowed.

On the top I turned and peered at the way we had come. I imagined I could see the balloons and party cake, hear 'Happy Birthday' being sung.

"Come *on*, Jean!"

At that moment I had wanted to die. Recklessly, I ignored the step down and launched myself from the top. The old stile was flaky, rickety and I clutched at my leg as I felt the splinter tear into it.

He stood over me, red with fury but controlled and icy.

"Daddy, I've hurt myself!"

"Good!"

He was taking his tie off, the ridiculous regimental tie that he wore at weekends. To bandage my leg? On no. I don't think I ever saw him without a tie. He's probably got one on now beneath the old man's anorak.

My father's foot misses the step and he loses his balance. As he pitches forward I hear the crack of his head on wood.

He tied me to the stile all those years ago and left me while he took my brother to gather fruit. I nursed my throbbing leg and, leaning against the warm wood, picked ineffectually at the splinter until the blood came and the sun went down and the trees grew dark and still. The knot in the tie tightened round my waist as I pulled against it. The evenings were closing in, it was now surely too dark to see but the pails had to be filled to capacity even though the brambles tore at small fingers and bloodied the buckets.

Birdsong was replaced by unidentifiable scurrying in the undergrowth. Remembered stories filled my head. It might be a yellow-toothed wolf who fed on the flesh of little girls. I was a human sacrifice, tied to the rock to await the dragon.

What scared me even more than the animal sounds was the thought that someone human would come and find me first. My mother warned us about 'funny men' who did nasty things to little children. Ironic, that. I didn't want to be rescued and I didn't want anyone to see my shame. But my father and Simon were the only people to come, with purple fingers and brimming buckets. Was it one hour, two hours later? I had no idea how long and I still don't. I had wanted to cry and I had wanted to pee and I was proud that I had done neither.

Now my father is still lying face forward though he has started a vigorous moaning. Back then the knot in the tie was so unyielding that he'd had to rummage for his penknife. My eyes are wet now but I don't cry for him.

"Come on, Dad."

I'm over the stile and helping him to a sitting position. There's a gash on his head but it's not bleeding profusely and his colour is normal. He'll live.

"I can't get up, Jean. I can't do it by myself."

With mixed contempt and satisfaction I notice a dark stain seeping around his crotch.

"I'm sorry".

So softly said I can hardly hear. Too late for recriminations, accusations.

"That's O.K., Dad."

He may be diminished but I can't manage him alone. "I'll get Simon."

He is wailing now. "And leave me here on my own?"

"Yes, Dad. I won't be long. You'll be alright."

I could take the long way round and he won't be rescued for at least half an hour.

I don't.