

Fish & Chips

They had a whale of an evening. Mike told the elephant joke. Melissa wiggled her arse on Cameron's knee. Charlie Sanderson smooched around the pub with Mhairi to "A good year for the roses" on the juke-box and pinched her bum. Fine. She loves these people.

But there is always closing time.

There are no chipshops in Strathdon. The nearest chippie is in Alford and it is closed long before the virtual lockin at the Colquhonnies scaled.

"Our place. Our place. Mhairi'll do pesto," he says.

The conversation stalls. The locals know better and Melissa heads her pals off at the pass. Which leaves embittered silent accusation.

"You driving?"

"I'm pissed."

"I'm not driving."

"Neither am I."

Mhairi slings the Porsche keys deftly into a clump of ground elder in the roadside ditch. End of conversation.

It's a long dark walk. She left him. She could have driven. The road winds through woods beside the bubbling river. There was a moon parting wisps of silver cloud. Bonny night. Really.

About half a mile from the bar a jeep passed at speed: it didn't slow down.

Mhairi was born in Clydebank – which wasn't a nice place before the Germans bombed it flat and it never recovered. For her a road home was tarmac and tenements and an inexorable sequence of streetlamps stretched down straights and around bends to the eventual dark, warm, odoriferous fug of home. The dark in which she found herself now is heaven. No question. People went their holidays to places like this.

In the kitchen, when she eventually reached home, there was the stink of deepfat frying. The frying was extreme, smoky, dangerous. Cameron was asleep with his head on the kitchen table, a large whisky by his left hand. Mhairi panicked. She disconnected the fryer at the wall and opened the kitchen door to the cold night air. She waited and waited.

When she awoke she was chilled. The room was cold. Cameron was gone along with the whisky. Inside the fryer a few charred fingers of potato enlarged in the congealed fat. They were saved. Her head pounded. It was five twenty six precisely.

"I got a lift," he said.

"You must have passed me."

"I know. You walked off."

She woke up and he was sleeping. He doesn't snore. She got up, made coffee, roused Bill. They listened to Radio One and chatted about Casualty. Bill whinged about the incompleteness of his football kit. They went. Mike and Charlie were there. Charlie winked.

And then?

The core of the argument is this:

SUIT YOURSELF.

It will happen. It happened. Nothing overwhelms it. It is rooted: solid in the face of flood. It is core central uranium.

You behave badly : SUIT YOURSELF
You nearly killed us: SUIT YOURSELF
You don't love me: SUIT YOURSELF

Inevitable: he has insurance.

"He doesn't love us."

Bill looked at her. Mhairi is OK, he thought. She's obviously not mad and she had always tried, tried bloody hard, to be straight. But now she was trying to implicate him in her problem. Not good. And yet it occurs to him suddenly: "Maybe Mum should have come to me." Except he was only seven then. Maybe she did and he couldn't remember. Maybe she did and he couldn't help. Maybe all those nights...

But this is crap! This is a fish and chips argument. We like fish and chips: she wants to cook dinner. What's wrong with fish and chips? Still.

Cameron lurked on his PC, pretending to do his accounts.

When Mhairi said, "Go!" he went. There was no argument. The keys were in the ignition of the Porsche which he had retrieved earlier from the pub.

Bill stood on the doorstep watching.

Mhairi said - "Look, just fucking go."

And Cameron said, winding down the electric window, he said, "Bill, what do you want to do?"

Bill stood on the steps of the cottage, watching all this play out before him like siegeworks penetrating closer and closer to the citadel. Christ.

There's a car and there's a home.

Bill turned and walked back into the cottage.

And Cameron said, "Suit yourself."

There was a gap. The house was quiet. She and Bill rubbed along doing normal things. Cameron did not contact them though she worked in the same office. She remembers on tv at the height of the troubles, a carbomb in Lurgan or one of those towns and how the splinters of buildings, of lives, seemed to hang in the air like a flock of birds, twisting, wondering how to fall - and then the sound and then the fall and then the chaos.

The sound was the clack of the letterbox the very next Saturday morning and the drop of envelopes onto the lino. First there were bills, just normal everyday bills: BT, hydroboard, Visa. And the rapid depletion of

the current account as his money disappeared and the mortgage started to amputate slice after slice of the surviving balance – which couldn't survive and didn't. She went to the bank. They had seen it all before. It was as commonplace as death. They had procedures, bounded sympathy.

And then, at the end of the third month, when she thought that all the pieces might have fallen, solicitors letters, thin slices of sense written "on behalf of our client" like voices through a wall. Division/dissolution. What cannot be divided should be sold. She thought of Bill. They mentioned a settlement. He called. She hung up.

It was always a Saturday. The letters were posted on Thursday. The tempo never varied, never picked up or slowed, as though the file circulated in some orderly stack, rising to the surface and returned to the base. Her lack of response elicited a measured escalation of consequences. Separation. Dissolution. Settlement. Legal action. Eviction.

She went to his desk but he was in Rotterdam: back Tuesday maybe.

Bill sensed her panic and felt responsible.

She lay awake then slept in for work. Bill took to rousing her, packing her out to work before going for the schoolbus. She could feel herself becoming shabby and grey. She is only 32.

One Sunday she got up and Bill was gone. The spare key, Cameron's key for the Audi, was on the kitchen

table. He didn't leave a housekey. He didn't leave a note. The house was completely silent. Even the clock had stopped. She went back to bed.

The day and night without Bill were the longest. She didn't go out. No one phoned. She sat stranded on a beach of divisible possessions - table lamps, ashtrays, tables, chairs out of which she must somehow build a shelter for when the wine rack was empty and the music ended.

She began: like sorting a wash, teasing apart the tangle of sameness into neat classifications: Mhairi's things and Cameron's; debatable things. She divides each room to left and to right so that she thinks of cleaning the carpet now that there is space, thinks it might enhance the sale price. She cannot face Bill's room: she looks in then seals it like some Phaoronic tomb.

Once classified (and now it's 3 am but the tv never ends now, just goes on and on, the volume turned down, just light and visions) Mhairi turned to more sophisticated forms of classification

- things Cameron would want but can't have
- things Cameron won't want but must have
- things Cameron will have on her terms
- things which would disappear

The rest was hers. She slept till twelve next day. The rain had stopped. She found the tarpaulin in the garage which Cameron had habitually draped over the Porsche, then dragged Cameron's things out onto the driveway (she had given him surprisingly little furniture) and draped the tarp over them.

In the centre, on the wicker rocking chair, she placed with difficulty his vinyl, 278 long playing records of the 70s and 80s which she had painstakingly superglued into 4 shiny black cylinders. She left him the sleeves: kept the Cds and stereo.

Down on the main road, Melissa drove by, slowed, sped on. She watched her red BMW through the breaks in the trees, winding its way up the valley.

The house was space, disjointed, not all there – which seemed about right. She played with reconstituting but couldn't see the point – she would live out of boxes and suitcases, eat in corners.

Cameron didn't stop. He must have dropped Bill at the foot of the drive. She didn't ask Bill what he said. She heard the Porsche then – speeding up the gears the way he did.

Bill stood for a while staring at the draped tarpaulin on the drive. She watched him from the window. He stood, he approached, he lifted the hem and stepped inside. He re-emerged and hunkered down. He straightened and walked back to the house. He carried nothing, was dressed in Friday's clothes.

She rushed to open the door for him but he got there first so they met in the hallway amidst the football boots and waterproofs and barbour.

"Make a good bonfire," he said.

"Probably. But we won't: it's his share, I want him to have it."

"Where's my stuff?"

"Upstairs. I didn't touch it."

"I decided to come back. Is that OK?"

"Yes."

"To tell the truth he never asked. I just told him to take me home. You'll never guess what he said."

"SUIT YOURSELF" – they said in unison and laughed together so that they both cried for the first time in all those weeks. They sat in the hall, scattering aside boots and scarves and sports bags, laughing and crying and letting it all subside, just holding not like clasped until they were both silent and the clock had restarted and was pacing out the future just ahead.

"We have a problem though," she said.

"What?"

"I hated the crockery. Always have."

"So you gave it to dad?"

"Yep."

"We could borrow it back."

"Nope. Fancy fish and chips?"

"OK," Bill said.

And as they stepped outside the rain began to fall.