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The Grandmothers

Doris Lessing

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Four Short Novels

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THE GRANDMOTHERS

On either side of a little promontory loaded with cafés and restaurants was a frisky but decorous sea, nothing like the real ocean that roared and rumbled outside the gape of the enclosing bay and barrier rocks known by everyone—and it was even on the charts—as Baxter’s Teeth. Who was Baxter? A good question, often asked, and answered by a framed sheet of skilfully antiqued paper on the wall of the restaurant at the end of the promontory, the one in the best, highest and most prestigious position. Baxter’s, it was called, claiming that the inner room of thin brick and reed had been Bill Baxter’s shack, built by his own hands. He had been a restless voyager, a seaman who had chanced on this paradise of a bay with its little tongue of rocky land. Earlier versions of the tale hinted at pacific and welcoming natives. Where did the Teeth come into it? Baxter remained an inveterate explorer of nearby shores and islands, and then, having entrusted himself to a little leaf of a boat built out of driftwood and expertise, he was wrecked one moony night on those seven black rocks, well within the sight of his little house where a storm lantern, as reliable as a lighthouse, welcomed in ships small enough to get into the bay, having negotiated the reef.

Baxter’s was now well planted with big trees that sheltered tables and attendant chairs, and on three sides below was the friendly sea.

A path wandered up through shrubs, coming to a stop in Baxter’s Gardens, and one afternoon six people were making the gentle ascent, four adults and two little girls, whose shrieks of pleasure echoed the noises of the gulls.

Two handsome men came first, not young, but only malice could call them middle-aged. One limped. Then two as handsome women of about sixty—but no one would dream of calling them elderly. At a table evidently well-known to them, they deposited bags and wraps and toys, sleek and shining people, as they are who know how to use the sun. They arranged themselves, the women’s brown and silky legs ending in negligent sandals, their competent hands temporarily at rest. Women on one side, men on the other, the little girls fidgeting: six fair heads? Surely they were related? Those had to be the mothers of the men; they had to be their sons. The little girls, clamouring for the beach, which was down a rocky path, were told by their grandmothers, and then their fathers, to behave and play nicely. They squatted and made patterns with fingers and little sticks in the dust. Pretty little girls: so they

should be with such good-looking progenitors.

From a window of Baxter's a girl called to them, 'The usual? Shall I bring your usual?' One of the women waved to her, meaning yes. Soon appeared a tray where fresh fruit juices and wholemeal sandwiches asserted that these were people careful of their health.

Theresa, who had just taken her school-leaving exams, was on her year away from England, where she would be returning to university. This information had been offered months ago, and in return she was kept up to date with the progress of the little girls at their first school. Now she enquired how school was going along, and first one child and then the other piped up to say their school was cool. The pretty waitress ran back to her station inside Baxter's with a smile at the two men which made the women smile at each other and then at their sons, one of whom, Tom, remarked 'But she'll never make it back to Britain, all the boys are after her to stay.'

'More fool her if she marries and throws all that away,' said one of the women, Roz—in fact Rozeanne, the mother of Tom. But the other woman, Lil (or Liliane), the mother of Ian, said, 'Oh, I don't know,' and she was smiling at Tom. This concession, or compliment, to their, after all, claim to existence, made the men nod to each other, lips compressed, humorously, as at an often-heard exchange, or one like it.

'Well,' said Roz, 'I don't care, nineteen is too young.'

'But who knows how it might turn out?' enquired Lil, and blushed. Feeling her face hot she made a little grimace, which had the effect of making her seem naughty, or daring, and this was so far from her character that the others exchanged looks not to be explained so easily.

They all sighed, heard each other and now laughed, a full frank laugh that seemed to acknowledge things unsaid. One little girl, Shirley, said, 'What are you laughing at?' and the other, Alice, 'What's so funny? I don't see anything funny,' and copied her grandmother's look of conscious naughtiness, which in fact had not been intended. Lil was uncomfortable and blushed again.

Shirley persisted, wanting attention, 'What's the joke, Daddy?' and at this both daddies began a tussling and buffeting of their daughters, while the girls protested, and ducked, but came back for more, and then fled to their grandmothers' arms and laps for protection. There they stayed, thumbs in their mouths, eyes drooping, yawning. It was a hot afternoon.

A scene of somnolence and satisfaction. At tables all around under the great trees similarly blessed people lazed. The seas all around them, only a few feet below, sighed and hissed and lapped, and the voices were low and lazy.

From the window of Baxter's Theresa stood with a tray of cool drinks momentarily suspended and looked out at the family. Tears slid down her cheeks. She had been in love with Tom and then Ian and then Tom again, for their looks and their ease, and something, an air of repletion, as if they had been soaking in pleasure all their lives and now gave it out in the form of invisible waves of contentment.

And then the way they handled the little girls, the ease and competence of that. And the way the grandmothers were always available, making the four the six...but where were the mothers, children

had mothers, and these two little girls had Hannah and Mary, both startlingly unlike the blonde family they had married into, being small and dark, and, while pretty enough, Theresa knew neither of them was good enough for the men. They worked. They owned a business. That is why the grandmothers were so often here. Didn't the grandmothers work, then? Yes, they did but were free to say, 'Let's go to Baxter's'—and up here to Baxter's they came. The mothers too, sometimes, and there were eight.

Theresa was in love with them all. She had at last understood it. The men, yes, her heart ached for them, but not too severely. What made the tears come was seeing them all there, watching them, as she did now. Behind her, at a table near the bar, was Derek, a young farmer who had wished to marry her. She didn't mind him, rather fancied him, but she knew that this, the family, was the real passion.

Over deep layers of tree shadow lanced with sunlight, sun enclosed the tree, the hot blue air, interfused with bliss, happiness, seemed about to exude great drops of something like a golden dew, which only she could see. It was at that moment she decided she would marry her farmer and stay here, on this continent. She could not leave it for the fitful charms of England, of Bradford, though the moors did well enough, when the sun did decide to shine. No, she would stay here, she had to. 'I want it, I want it,' she told herself, allowing the tears at last to run freely. She wanted this physical ease, the calm of it, expressing itself in lazy movements, in long brown legs and arms, and the glint of gold on fair heads where the sun had been.

Just as she claimed her future, she saw one of the mothers coming up the path. Mary—yes, it was. A little dark fidget of a woman, with nothing in her of the poise and style of The Family.

She was coming up slowly. She stopped, stared, went on, stopped, and she was moving with a deliberation that was willed.

'Well, what's got into *her*, I wonder?' mused Theresa, at last leaving her window to take the tray to by now surely impatient customers. Mary Struthers was hardly moving at all. She stood staring at her family, frowning. Roz Struthers saw her and waved, and then again, and while her hand slowly lowered itself, as if caution had made an announcement, her face was already beginning to lose its gloss and glow. She was looking, but as it were indirectly, at her daughter-in-law, and because of what her face was saying, her son Tom turned to look, then wave. Ian, too, waved. Both men's hands fell, as Roz's had done; there was fatality in it.

Mary had stopped. Near her was a table and she collapsed into a chair. Still she stared at Lil, and then at Tom, her husband. From one face to the other those narrowed accusing eyes moved. Eyes that searched for something. In her hand was a packet. Letters. She sat perhaps ten feet away, staring.

Theresa, having dealt with her other tables, was in her window again, and she was thinking accusing thoughts about Mary, this wife of a son, and she knew it was jealousy. She defended herself thus: But if she was good enough for them, I wouldn't mind her. She's just nothing compared to them.

Only the eye of jealousy could have dismissed Mary, who was a striking, attractive, dark young woman. She wasn't pretty now; her face was small and putty-coloured and her lips were thin. Theresa saw the bundle of letters. She saw the four people at the table. As if they were playing statues, she thought. Light was draining away from them. The splendid afternoon might be brazening it all out but they sat struck, motionless. And still Mary stared, now at Lil, or Liliane, now at Roz or Rozeanne; from them to Tom, and to Ian, and then around again, and again.

From an impulse Theresa did not recognise in herself she poured water from the jug in the fridge into a glass, and ran across with it to Mary. Mary did turn her head slowly to frown into Theresa's face, but did not take the glass. Theresa set it down. Then Mary was attracted by the glitter of the water, reached out her hand for the glass, but withdrew it: her hand was shaking too hard to hold a glass.

Theresa went back to her window. The afternoon had gone dark for her. She was trembling too. What was the matter? What was wrong? Something was horribly, fatally wrong.

At last Mary got up, with difficulty, made the distance to the table where her family sat, and let herself subside into a chair that was away from them: she was not part of them.

Now the four were taking in that bundle of letters in Mary's hand.

They sat quite still, looking at Mary. Waiting.

It was for her to speak. But did she need to? Her lips trembled, she trembled, she appeared to be on the verge of a faint, and those young clear accusing eyes moved still from one face to another. Tom. Lil. Roz. Ian. Her mouth was twisted, as if she had bitten into something sour.

'What's wrong with them, what's wrong?' thought Theresa, staring from her window, and whereas not an hour ago she had decided she could never leave this coast, this scene of pleasantness and plenitude, now she thought, I must get away. I'll tell Derek, no. I want to get out.

Alice, the child on Roz's lap, woke with a cry, saw her mother there, 'Mummy, Mummy,'—and held out her arms. Mary managed to get up, steadied herself around the table on the backs of chairs, and took Alice.

Now it was the other little girl, waking on Lil's lap. 'Where's my mummy?'

Mary held out her hand for Shirley and in a moment both children were on her knees.

The little girls felt Mary's panic, her anger, sensed some kind of fatality, and now tried to get back to their grandmothers. 'Granny, Granny,' 'I want Granny.'

Mary gripped them both tight.

On Roz's face was a small bitter smile, as if she exchanged confirmation of some bad news with someone deep inside herself.

'Granny, are you coming to fetch me tomorrow for the beach?'

And Alice, 'Granny, you promised we would go to the beach.'

And now Mary spoke at last, her voice shaking. All she said was, 'No, you will not be going to the beach.' And, direct to the older women, 'You will not be taking Shirley and Alice to the beach.' That was the judgement and the sentence.

Lil said tentatively, even humbly, 'I'll see you soon, Alice.'

‘No you won’t,’ said Mary. She stood up, a child on either hand, the bundle of letters thrust into the pocket of her slacks. ‘No,’ she said wildly, the emotion that had been poisoning her at last pulsing out. ‘No. No, you won’t. Not ever. You will not ever see them again.’

She turned to go, pulling the children with her.

Her husband Tom said, ‘Wait a minute, Mary.’

‘No.’ Off she went down the path, as fast as she could, stumbling and pulling the children along.

And now surely these four remaining, the women and their sons, should say something, elucidate, make things clear? Not a word. Pinched, diminished, darkened, they sat on, and then at last one spoke. It was Ian who spoke, direct to Roz, in a passionate intimacy, wild-eyed, his lips stiff and angry.

‘It’s your fault,’ he said. ‘Yes, it’s your fault. I told you. It’s all your fault this has happened.’

Roz met his anger with her own. She laughed. A hard angry bitter laugh, peal after peal. ‘My fault,’ she said. ‘Of course. Who else?’ And she laughed. It would have done well on the stage, that laugh, but tears poured down her face.

Out of sight down the path, Mary had reached Hannah, the wife of Ian, who had been unable to face the guilty ones, at least not with Mary, whose rage she could not match. She had let Mary go up by herself and she waited here, full of doubt, misery and reproaches that were beginning to bubble up wanting to overflow. But not in anger, no, she needed explanations. She took Shirley from Mary, and the two young women, their children in their arms, stood together on the path, just outside a plumbag hedge that was the boundary for another café. They did not speak, but looked into each other’s faces, Hannah seeking confirmation, which she got. ‘It’s true, Hannah.’

And now, the laughter. Roz was laughing. The peals of hard laughter, triumphant laughter, was what Mary and Hannah heard, each harsh loud peal lashed them, they shrank away from the cruel sounds. They trembled as the whips of laughter fell.

‘Evil,’ Mary pronounced at last, through lips that seemed to have become dough or clay. And as Roz’s final yells of laughter reached them, the two young women burst into tears and went running away down the path, away from their husbands, and their husbands’ mothers.

Two little girls arrived at the big school on the same day, at the same hour, took each other’s measure and became best friends. Little things, so bravely confronting that great school, as populous and busy as a supermarket, but filled with what they already knew were hierarchies of girls they felt as hostile, but here was an ally, and they stood holding hands, trembling with fear and their efforts to be brave. The great school, standing on its rise, surrounded by parkland in the English manner, but arched over by a most un-English sky, about to absorb these little things, babies really, their four parents thought—enough to bring tears to their eyes!—and they did.

They were doughty, quick with repartee, and soon lived down the bullying that greeted new girls. They stood up for each other, fought their own and each other’s battles. ‘Like sisters,’ people said, and even, ‘Like twins.’ Fair, they were, with their neat gleaming ponytails, both of them, and blue-eyed,

and as quick as fishes, but really, if you looked, not so alike. Liliane—or Lil—was thin, with a hard little body, her features delicate, and Rozeanne—Roz—was sturdier, and where Lil regarded the world with a pure severe gaze, Roz found jokes in everything. But it is nice to think, and say, ‘like sisters’, ‘they might be twins’; it is agreeable to find resemblances where perhaps none are, and so it went on, through the school terms and the years, two girls, inseparable, which was nice for their families, living in the same street, with parents who had become friends because of them, as so often happens, knowing they were lucky in their girls choosing each other and making lives easy for everyone.

But these lives were easy. Not many people in the world have lives so pleasant, unproblematical, unreflecting: no one on these blessed coasts lay awake and wept for their sins, or for money, let alone for food. What a good-looking lot, smooth and shiny with sun, with sport, with good food. Few people anywhere know of coasts like these, except perhaps for brief holidays, or in travellers’ tales like dreams. Sun and sea, sea and sun, and always the sound of waves on beaches.

It was a blue world the little girls grew up in. At the end of every street was the sea, as blue as their eyes—as they were told often enough. Over their heads the blue sky was so seldom louring or grey that such days were enjoyable for their rarity. A rare harsh wind brought the pleasant sting of salt and the air was always salty. The little girls would lick the salt from their own hands and arms and from each other’s too, in a game they called, ‘Playing puppies’. Bedtime baths were always salty so that they had to shower off the bath water with water coming from deep in the earth and tasting of minerals, not salt. When Roz stayed over at Lil’s house, or Lil at Roz’s, the parents would stand smiling down at the two pretty imps cuddled together like kittens or puppies, smelling now they were asleep not of salt but of soap. And always, throughout their childhoods, day and night, the sound of the sea, the gentle tamed waves of Baxter’s sea, a hushing and a lulling, like breathing.

Sisters, or, for that matter, twins, even best friends, suffer passionate rivalries, often concealed, even from each other. But Roz knew how Lil grieved when her breasts—Roz’s—popped forth a good year before Lil’s, not to mention other evidences of growing up, and she was generous in assurances and comfort, knowing that her own deep envy of her friend was not going to be cured by time. She wished that her own body could be as hard and thin as Lil’s, who wore her clothes with such style and ease, whereas she was already being called—by the unkind—plump. She had to be careful what she ate, whereas Lil could eat what she liked.

So there they were, quite soon, teenagers, Lil the athlete, excelling in every sport, and Roz in the school plays, with big parts, making people laugh, extrovert, large, vital, loud: they complemented each other as once they had been as like as two peas: ‘You can hardly tell them apart.’

They both went to university, Lil because of the sport, Roz because of the theatre group, and they remained best friends, sharing news about their conquests, and making light of their rivalries, but the closeness was such that although they starred in such different arenas, their names were always coupled. Neither went in for the great excluding passions, broken hearts, jealousies.

And now that was it, university done with, here was the grownup world, and this was a culture where girls married young. ‘Twenty and *still* not married!’

Roz began dating Harold Struthers, an academic, and a bit of a poet, too; and Lil met Theo Western, who owned a sports equipment and clothes shop. Rather, shops. He was well off. The men got on—the women were careful that they did, and there was a double wedding.

So far so good.

Those shrimps, the silverfish, the minnows, were now wonderful young women, one in a wedding dress like an arum lily (Liliane) and Roz's like a silver rose. So judged the main fashion page of the big paper.

They lived in two houses in a street running down to the sea, not far from the outspit of land that held Baxter's, unfashionable but artistic, and, by that law that says if you want to know if an area is going up, then look to see if those early swallows, the artists, are moving in, it would not be unfashionable for long. They were on opposite sides of the street.

Lil was a swimming champion known over the whole continent and abroad too, and Roz not only acted and sang, but was putting on plays and began devising shows and spectacles. Both were very busy. Despite all this Liliane and Theo Western announced the birth of Ian, and Rozeanne and Harold Struthers followed within a week with Thomas.

Two little boys, fair-haired and delightful, and people said they could be brothers. In fact Tom was a solid little boy easily embarrassed by the exuberances of his mother, and Ian was fine drawn and nervy and 'difficult' in ways Tom never was. He did not sleep well, and sometimes had nightmares.

The two families spent weekends and holidays together, one big happy family, as Roz sang, defining the situation, and the two men might go off on trips into the mountains or to fish, or backpacking. Boys will be boys, as Roz said.

All this went on, and anything that was not what it should be was kept well out of sight. 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it,' Roz might say. She was concerned for Lil, for reasons that will emerge, but not for herself. Lil might have her problems, but not she, not she and Harold and Tom. Everything was going along fine.

And then this happened.

The scene: the connubial bedroom, when the boys were about ten. Roz lay sprawling on the bed, Harold sat on the arm of a chair, looking at his wife, smiling, but determined. He had just said he had been offered a professorship, in a university in another state.

Roz said, 'Well, I suppose you can come down for weekends or we can come up.'

This was so like her, the dismissal of a threat—surely?—to their marriage, that he gave a short, non-affectionate laugh, and after a pause said, 'I want you and Tom to come too.'

'Move from *here*?' And Roz sat up shaking her fair and now curly head so that she could see him clearly. 'Move?'

'Why don't you just say it? Move from Lil, that's the point, isn't it?'

Roz clasped her hands together on her upper chest, all theatrical consternation. But she was genuinely astounded, indignant.

'What are you suggesting?'

‘I’m not suggesting. I’m saying. Strange as it may seem...’—This phrase usually signals strife—‘I’d like a wife. A real one.’

‘You’re mad.’

‘No. I want you to watch something.’ He produced a canister of film. ‘Please, Roz. I mean it. I want you to come next door and watch this.’

Up got Roz, off the bed, all humorous protest.

She was all but nude. With a deep sigh, aimed at the gods, or some impartial viewer, she put on a pink feathered negligee, salvaged from a play’s wardrobe: she had felt it was so *her*.

She sat in the next room, opposite a bit of white wall kept clear of clutter. ‘And now what are you up to, I wonder?’ she said, amiably. ‘You big booby, Harold. *Really*, I mean, I ask you!’

Harold began running the film—home movies. It was of the four of them, two husbands, the two women. They had been on the beach, and wore wraps over bikinis. The men were still in their swimming trunks. Roz and Lil sat on the sofa, this sofa, where Roz now was, and the men were in hard-upright chairs, sitting forward to watch. The women were talking. What about? Did it matter? They were watching each other’s faces, coming in quickly to make a point. The men kept trying to intervene, join in, the women literally did not hear them. Harold, then Theo, was annoyed, and they raised their voices, but the women still did not hear, and when at last the men shouted, insisting, Roz put out a hand to stop them.

Roz remembered the discussion, just. It was not important. The boys were to go to a friend’s for a weekend camp. The parents were discussing it, that was all. In fact the mothers were discussing it, the fathers might just as well not have been there.

The men had been silenced, sat watching and even exchanged looks. Harold was annoyed, but Theo’s demeanour said only, ‘*Women, what do you expect?*’

And then, that subject disposed of—the boys—Roz said, ‘I simply must tell you...’ and leaned forward to tell Lil, dropping her voice, not knowing she did this, telling her something, nothing important.

The husbands sat and watched, Harold all alert irony, Theo bored.

It went on. The tape ran out.

‘Do you mean to say you actually filmed that—to trap me? You set it up, to get at me!’

‘No, don’t you remember? I had made a film of the boys on the beach. Then you took the camera and filmed me and Theo. And then Theo said, “How about the girls?”’

‘Oh,’ said Roz.

‘Yes. It was only when I played it back later—yesterday, in fact, that I saw...Not that I was surprised. That’s how it always is. It’s you and Lil. Always.’

‘What are you suggesting? Are you saying we’re lezzies?’

‘No. I’m not. And what difference would it make if you were?’

‘I simply don’t get it.’

‘Obviously sex doesn’t matter that much. We have, I think, more than adequate sex, but it’s not me you have the relationship with.’

Roz sat, all twisted with emotion, wringing her hands, the tears ready to start.

‘And so I want you to come with me up north.’

‘You must be mad.’

‘Oh, I know you won’t, but you could at least pretend to think about it.’

‘Are you suggesting we divorce?’

‘I wasn’t, actually. If I found a woman who put me first then...’

‘You’d let me know!’ she said, all tears at last.

‘Oh, Roz,’ said her husband. ‘Don’t think I’m not sorry. I’m fond of you, you know that. I’ll miss you like crazy. You’re my pal. And you’re the best lay I’m ever likely to have and I know that too. But I feel like a sort of shadow here. I don’t matter. That’s all.’

And now it was his turn to blink away tears and then put his hands up to his eyes. He went back to the bedroom, lay down on the bed, and she joined him. They comforted each other. ‘You’re mad, Harold, do you know that? I love you.’ ‘And I love you too Roz, don’t think that I don’t.’

Then Roz asked Lil to come over, and the two women watched the film, without speaking, to its end.

‘And that’s why Harold is leaving me,’ said Roz, who had told Lil the outlines of the situation.

‘I don’t see it,’ said Lil at last, frowning with the effort of trying. She was deadly serious, and Roz serious but smiling and angry.

‘Harold says my real relationship is with you, not with him.’

‘What does he want, then?’ asked Lil.

‘He says you and I made him feel excluded.’

‘He feel excluded! I’ve always felt—left out. All these years I’ve been watching you and Harold and I’ve wished...’ Loyalty had locked her tongue until this moment, but now she came out with it at last: ‘I have a lousy marriage. I have a bad time with Theo. I’ve never...but you knew. And you and Harold, always so happy...I don’t know how often I’ve left you two here and gone home with Theo

and wished...'

'I didn't know...I mean, I did know, of course, Theo isn't the ideal husband.'

'You can say that again.'

'It seems to me it's you who should be getting a divorce.'

'Oh, no, no,' said Lil, warding off the idea with an agitated hand. 'No; I once said in joke to Ian testing him out, what he'd think if I got a divorce and he nearly went berserk. He was silent for such a long time—you know how he goes silent, and then he shouted and began crying. "You can't," he said. "You can't. I won't let you."'

'So poor Tom is going to be without a father,' said Roz.

'And Ian doesn't have much of one,' said Lil. And then, when it could seem the conversation was at an end, she enquired, 'Roz, did Harold say that we are lezzies?'

'All but—well no, not exactly.'

'Is that what he meant?'

'I don't know. I don't think so.' Roz was suffering now with the effort of this unusual and unwonted introspection. 'I don't understand, I told him. I don't understand what you're on about.'

'Well, we aren't, are we?' enquired Lil, apparently needing to be told.

'Well, I don't think we are,' said Roz.

'We've always been friends, though.'

'Yes.'

'When did it start? I remember the first day at school.'

'Yes.'

'But before that? How did it happen?'

'I can't remember. Perhaps it was just—luck.'

'You can say that again. The luckiest thing in my life—you.'

'Yes,' said Roz. 'But that doesn't make us...Bloody men,' she said, suddenly energetic and bristling with anger.

'Bloody men,' said Lil, with feeling, because of her husband.

This note, obligatory for that time, having been struck, the conversation was over.

Off went Harold to his university which was surrounded, not by ocean and sea winds and the songs and tales of the sea, but by sand, scrub and thorns. Roz visited him, and then returned there to put on *Oklahoma!*—a great success—and they enjoyed their more than adequate sex. She said, ‘I don’t see what you’re complaining about,’ and he said, ‘Well, no, you wouldn’t, would you?’ When he came down to visit her and the boys—who being always together were always referred to in the plural—nothing seemed to have changed. As a family they went about, the amiable Harold and the exuberant Roz, a popular young couple—perhaps not so young now—as described often in the gossip columns. For a marriage that had been given its notice to quit the two seemed no less of a couple. As they jested—jokes had never been in short supply—they were like those trees whose centre has rotted away, or the bushes spreading from the centre, which disappear as its suburbs spring up. It was so hard for this couple to fray apart. Everywhere they went, his old pupils greeted him and people who had been involved in one of her productions greeted her. They were Harold and Roz to hundreds of people. ‘Do you remember me—Roz, Harold?’ She always did and Harold knew his old pupils. Like Royalty who expect of themselves that they remember faces and names. ‘The Struthers are separating? Oh, come on! I don’t believe it.’

And now the other couple, no less in the limelight, Lil always judging swimming or running or other sports events, bestowing prizes, making speeches. And there too was the handsome husband, Theo, known for the chain of sports equipment and clothes shops. The two lean, good-looking people on view, like their friends, the other couple, but so different in style. Nothing excessive or exuberant about them, they were affable, smiling, available, the very essence of good citizenship.

The break-up of Roz and Harold did not disrupt Theo and Lil. The marriage had been a façade for years. Theo had a succession of girls, but, as he complained, he couldn’t get into his bed anywhere without finding a girl in it: he travelled a lot, for the firm.

Then Theo was killed in a car crash, and Lil was a well-off widow, with her boy Ian, the moody one, so unlike Tom, and in that seaside town, where the climate and the style of living put people so much on view, there were two women, without men, and their two little boys.

The young couple with their children: interesting that, the turning point, the moment of change. For a time, seen, commented on, a focus, the young parents, by definition sexual beings, and tagging along or running around them the pretty children. ‘Oh, what a lovely little boy, what a pretty little girl. What’s your name?—what a nice name!’—and then all at once, or so it seems, the parents, no longer quite so young, seem to lose height a little, even to shrink, they certainly lose colour and lustre. ‘How old did you say he is, she is...’ The young ones are shooting up and glamour has shifted its quarters. Eyes are following them, rather than the parents. ‘They do grow up so fast these days, don’t they?’

The two good-looking women, together again as if men had not entered their equation at all, were about with the two beautiful boys, one rather delicate and poetic with sun-burnished locks falling over his forehead, and the other strong and athletic, friends, as their mothers had been at that age. There was a father in the picture, Harold, up north, but he’d shackled up with a young woman who presumably did not suffer from Roz’s deficiencies. He came to visit, and stayed in Roz’s house, but not in the bedroom (which had to strike both partners as absurd), and Tom visited him in his university. But the reality was, two women in their mid-thirties, and two lads who were not far off being young men. The houses, so close, opposite each other, seemed to belong to both families. ‘We are an extended family,’ cried Roz, not one to let a situation remain undefined.

The beauty of young boys—now, that isn't an easy thing. Girls, yes, full of their enticing eggs, the mothers of us all, that makes sense, they should be beautiful and usually are, even if only for a year or a day. But boys—why? What for? There is a time, a short time, at about sixteen, seventeen, when they have a poetic aura. They are like young gods. Their families and their friends may be awed by these beings who seem visitors from a finer air. They are often unaware of it, seeming to themselves more like awkwardly packed parcels they are trying to hold together.

Roz and Lil lolled on the little verandah overlooking the sea, and saw the two boys come walking up the path, frowning a little, dangling swimming things they would put to dry on the verandah wall, and they were so beautiful the two women sat up to look at each other, sharing incredulity. 'Good God!' said Roz. 'Yes,' said Lil. 'We made that, we made them,' said Roz. 'If we didn't, who did?' said Lil. And the boys, having disposed of their towels and trunks, went past with smiles that indicated they were busy on their own affairs: they did not want to be summoned for food or to tidy their beds, or something equally unimportant.

'My God!' said Roz again. 'Wait, Lil...' She got up and went inside, and Lil waited, smiling a little to herself, as she often did, at her friend's dramatic ways. Out came Roz with a book in her hand and a photograph album. She pushed her chair against Lil's, and together they turned the pages past babies on rugs, babies in baths—themselves, then 'her first step' and 'the first tooth'—and they were at the page they knew they both sought. Two girls, at about sixteen.

'My God!' said Roz.

'We didn't do too badly, then,' said Lil.

Pretty girls, yes, very, all sugar and spice, but if photographs were taken now of Ian and Tom, would they show the glamour that stopped the breath when one saw them walk across a room or saunter up out of the waves?

They lingered over the pages of themselves, in this album, Roz's; Lil's would have to be the same. Photographs of Roz, with Lil. Two pretty girls.

What they were looking for they did not find. Nowhere could they find the shine of unearthliness that illuminated their two sons, at this time.

And there they were sitting, the album spread out across both their stretched-out brown legs—they were in bikinis—when the boys came out, glasses of fruit juice in their hands.

They sat on the wall of the verandah's edge and contemplated their mothers, Roz and Lil.

'What are they doing?' Ian seriously asked Tom.

'What are they doing?' echoed Tom, owlshly, joking as always. He jumped up, peered down at the open page, half on Roz's, half on Lil's knees, and returned to his place. 'They are admiring their beauty when they were nymphets,' he reported to Ian. 'Aren't you, Ma?' he said to Roz.

'That's right,' said Roz. 'Tempus fugit. It fugits like anything. You have no idea—yet. We wanted to find out what we were like all those years ago.'

‘Not so many years,’ said Lil.

‘Don’t bother to count,’ said Roz. ‘Enough years.’

Now Ian captured the album off the women’s thighs, and he and Tom sat staring at the girls, the mothers.

‘They weren’t bad,’ said Tom to Ian.

‘Not bad at all,’ said Ian to Tom.

The women smiled at each other: more of a grimace.

‘But you are better now,’ said Ian, and went red.

‘Oh, you are charming,’ said Roz, accepting the compliment for herself.

‘I don’t know,’ said the clown, Tom, pretending to compare the old photographs with the two women sitting there, in their bikinis. ‘I don’t know. Now?’— and he screwed up his eyes for the examination. ‘And then.’ He bent to goggle at the photographs.

‘Now has it,’ he pronounced. ‘Yes, better now.’ And at this the two boys fell to foot-and-shoulder wrestling, or jostling, as they often still did, like boys, though what people saw were young gods who couldn’t take a step or make a gesture that was not from some archaic vase, or antique dance.

‘Our mothers,’ said Tom, toasting them in orange juice.

‘Our mothers,’ said Ian, smiling directly at Roz in a way that made her shift about in her chair and move her legs.

Roz had said to Lil that Ian had a crush on her, Roz, and Lil had said, ‘Well, never mind, he’ll get over it.’

What Ian was not getting over, had not begun to get over, was his father’s death, already a couple of years behind, in time. From the moment he had ceased to have a father he had pined, becoming thinner, almost transparent, so that his mother complained, ‘Do eat, Ian, eat something—you must.’

‘Oh, leave me alone.’

It was all right for Tom, whose father turned up sometimes, and whom he visited up there in his landlocked university. But Ian had nothing, not even warming memories. Where his father should have been, unsatisfactory as he had been with his affairs and his frequent absences, was nothing, a blank, and Ian tried to put a brave face on it, had bad dreams, and both women’s hearts ached for him.

A big boy, his eyes heavy with crying, he would go to his mother, where she sat on a sofa, and collapse beside her, and she would put her arms around him. Or go to Roz, and she embraced him, ‘Poor Ian.’

And Tom watched this, seriously, coming to terms with this grief, not his own, but its presence

close in his friend, his almost brother, Ian. 'They are like brothers,' people said. 'Those two, they might as well be brothers.' But in one a calamity was eating away, like a cancer, and not in the other, who tried to imagine the pain of grief and failed.

One night, Roz got up out of her bed to fetch herself a drink from the fridge. Ian was in the house staying the night with Tom, as so often happened. He would use the second bed in Tom's room, or Harold's room, where he was now. Roz heard him crying and without hesitation went in to put her arms around him, cuddled him like a small boy, as after all she had been doing all his life. He went to sleep in her arms and in the morning his looks at her were demanding, hungry, painful. Roz was silent, contemplating the events of the night. She did not tell Lil what had happened. But what had happened? Nothing that had not a hundred times before. But it was odd. 'She didn't want to worry her!' Really? When had she ever been inhibited from telling Lil everything?

It happened that Tom was over at Lil's house, across the street, with Ian, for a couple of nights. Roz alone, telephoned Harold, and they had an almost connubial chat.

'How's Tom?'

'Oh, he's fine. Tom's always fine. But Ian's not too good. He really is taking Theo's death hard.'

'Poor kid, he'll get over it.'

'He's taking his time, then. Listen, Harold, next time you come perhaps you could take out Ian by himself?'

'What about Tom?'

'Tom'd understand. He's worried about Ian, I know.'

'Right. I'll do that. Count on me.'

And Harold did come, and did take Ian off for a long walk along the sea's edge, and Ian talked to Harold, whom he had known all his life, more like a second father.

'He's very unhappy,' Harold reported to Roz and to Lil.

'I know he is,' said Lil.

'He thinks he's no good. He thinks he's a failure.'

The adults stared at this fact, as if it were something they could actually see.

'But how can you be a failure at seventeen?' said Lil.

'Did we feel like that?' asked Roz.

'I know I did,' said Harold. 'Don't worry.' And back he went to his desert university. He was thinking of getting married again.

‘Okay,’ said Roz. ‘If you want a divorce.’

‘Well, I suppose she’ll want kids,’ said Harold.

‘Don’t you know?’

‘She’s twenty-five,’ said Harold. ‘Do I have to ask?’

‘Ah,’ said Roz, seeing it all. ‘You don’t want to put the idea into her head?’ She laughed at him.

‘I suppose so,’ said Harold.

Then Ian was again spending the night with Tom. Rather, he was there at bedtime. He went off to Harold’s room, and there was a quick glance at Roz, which she hoped Tom had not seen.

When she woke in the night, ready to go off to the fridge for a drink, or just to wander about the house in the dark, as she often did, she did not go, afraid of hearing Ian crying, afraid she would not be able to stop herself going into him. But then she found he had blundered through the dark into her room and was beside her, clutching at her like a lifebelt in a storm. And she actually found herself picturing those seven black rocks like rotten teeth in the black night out there, the waves pouring and dashing around them in white cascades of foam.

Next morning Roz was sitting at the table in the room that was open to the verandah, and the sea air, and the wash and hush and lull of the sea. Tom stumbled in fresh from his bed, the smell on him of youthful sleep. ‘Where’s Ian?’ he asked. Normally he would not have asked: both boys could sleep until midday.

Roz stirred her coffee, around and around, and said, without looking at him, ‘He’s in my bed.’

This normally would not have merited much notice, since this extended family’s casual ways could accommodate mothers and boys, or the women, or either boy with either woman, lying down for a rest or a chat, or the two boys, and, when he was around, Harold with any of them.

Tom stared at her over his still-empty plate.

Roz accepted that look, and her look back might as well have been a nod.

‘Jesus!’ said Tom.

‘Exactly,’ said Roz.

And then Tom ignored his plate and possible orange juice, leaped up, grabbed his swimming-trunks from the verandah wall, and he sprinted off down to the sea. Usually he would have yelled at Ian to go too.

Tom was not around that day. It was school holidays, but apparently he was off on some school holiday activity, generally scorned by him.

Lil was away, judging some sports competition, and was not back until evening. She came into

Roz's house and said, 'Roz, I'm whacked. Is there anything to eat?'

Ian was at the table, sitting across from Roz but not looking at her. Tom had a plate of food in front of him. And now Tom began talking to Lil as if no one else was there. Lil scarcely noticed this, she was so tired, but the other two did. And he kept it up until the meal was over and Lil said she must go to bed, she was exhausted, and Tom simply got up and went with her into the dark.

Next morning, lateish for them all, Tom walked back across the street and found Roz at the table in her usual careless, comfortable pose, her wrap loose about her. He did not look at her but all around her, at the room, the ceiling, through a delirium of happy accomplishment. Roz did not have to guess at his condition; she knew it, because Ian's similar state had been enveloping her all night.

Now Tom was prowling around the room, taking swipes as he passed at a chair arm, the table, a wall, returning to aim a punch at the chair next to hers, like a schoolboy unable to contain exuberance but then standing to stare in front of him, frowning, thinking—like an adult. Then he whirled about and was close to his mother, all schoolboy, an embodied snigger, a leer. And then trepidation—he was not sure of himself, nor of his mother, who blushed scarlet, went white, and then got up and deliberately slapped him hard, this way, that way, across the face.

'Don't you dare,' she whispered, trembling with rage. 'How dare you...'

Half crouching, hands to his head, protecting it, he peered up at her, face distorted in what could have been a schoolboy's blubbering, but then he took command of himself, stood and said directly to her, 'I'm sorry,' though neither he nor she could have said exactly what it was he was sorry for, nor what he was not to dare. Not to let words, or his face, say what he had learned of women in the night just passed, with Lil?

He sat down, put his face in his hands, then leaped up, grabbed his swimming things and was off running into the sea, which this morning was a flat blue plate rimmed by the colourful houses of the enclosing arm of the bay opposite.

Tom did not come into his mother's house that day but made a detour back to Lil's. Ian slept late—nothing new in that. He, too, found it hard to look at her, but she knew it was the sight of her, so terribly familiar, so terribly and newly revelatory, it was too much, and so he snatched up his bundle of swimming things and was off. He did not come back until dark. She had done small tasks, made routine telephone calls, cooked, stood soberly scanning the house opposite, which showed no signs of life, and then, when Ian returned, made them both supper and they went back to bed, locking the house front and back—which was something not always remembered.

A week passed. Roz was sitting alone at the table with a cup of tea when there was a knock. She could not ignore it, she knew that, though she would have liked to stay inside this dream or enchantment that had so unexpectedly consumed her. She had dragged on jeans and a shirt, so she was respectable to look at, at least. She opened the door on the friendly, enquiring face of Saul Butler, who lived some doors along from Lil, and was their good neighbour. He was here because he fancied Lil and wanted her to marry him.

When he sat down and accepted tea, she waited.

‘Haven’t seen much of you lot recently, and I can’t get any reply at Lil’s.’

‘Well, it’s the school holidays.’

But usually she and the boys, Lil and the boys, would have been in and out, and often people waved at them from the street, where they all sat around the table.

‘That boy, Ian, he needs a father,’ he challenged her.

‘Yes, he does,’ she agreed at once: she had learned in the past week just how much the boy needed a father.

‘I’m pretty sure I’d be a father to Ian—as much as he’d let me.’

Saul Butler was a well-set-up man of about fifty, not looking his age. He ran a chain of artists’ equipment shops, paints, canvases, frames, all that kind of thing, and he knew Lil from working with her on the town’s trade associations. Roz and Lil had agreed he would make a fine husband, if either of them had been looking for one.

She said, as she had before, ‘Shouldn’t you be saying this to Lil?’

‘But I do. She must be sick of me—staking my claim.’

‘And you want me to support—your claim?’

‘That’s about it. I think I’m a pretty good proposition,’ he said, smiling, mocking his own boasting.

‘I think you’d be a good proposition too,’ said Roz, laughing, enjoying the flirtation, if that was what it was. A week of love-making, and she was falling into the flirtatious mode as if into a bed. ‘But that’s no use is it, it’s Lil you want.’

‘Yes. I’ve had my eye on Lil for—a long time.’ This meant, before his wife left him for another man. ‘Yes. But she only laughs at me. Now, why is that, I wonder? I’m a very serious sort of chap. And where are the lads this morning?’

‘Swimming, I suppose.’

‘I only dropped in to make sure you are all getting along all right.’ He got up, finished his tea standing, and said, ‘See you on the beach.’

Off he went and Roz rang Lil, and said, ‘We’ve got to be seen about a bit more. Saul dropped in

‘I suppose so,’ said Lil, her voice heavy, and low.

‘We should be seen on the beach, all four of us.’

A hot morning. The sea shimmered off light. The sky was full of a light that could punish the eyes, without dark defending glasses. Lil and Roz, in loose wraps over their bikinis, slathered with

suncream, made their way behind the boys to the beach. It was a well-used beach, but at this hour, on weekday, there were few people. Two chairs, set close against Roz's fence, were faded and battered by storm and sun, but serviceable, and there the women sat themselves. The boys had gone running into the sea. Tom had scarcely greeted his mother; Ian's look at Lil slid off her and away.

The waves were brisk enough for pleasure, but in here, in the bay, were never big enough for surfing, which went on outside, past the Teeth. For all the years of the boys' childhood they played safe, on this beach, but now they saw it as good enough for a swim, and for the serious dangerous stuff they went out on to the surfers' beaches. The two were swimming well apart, ignoring each other, and the women's eyes were behind the secretive dark glasses, and neither wanted to talk—could not.

They saw a head like a seal's quite far out grow larger, and then it was Saul, and he came out of the sea, waving at them, but went up through the salty sea bushes and past the houses up to the street.

The boys were swimming in. When they reached the shallows they stood up and faced each other. They began to tussle. Thus had they fought all through their growing-up, boy fashion, but soon it was evident that there was nothing childlike about this fight. They were standing waist deep, waves came rushing in, battering them with foam, and streamed away, and then Ian had disappeared and Tom was holding him down. A wave came in, another, and Lil started up in anguish and said, 'Oh, my God, he's going to kill Ian. Tom's going to kill...'

Ian reappeared, gasping, clutching Tom's shoulders. Down he went again.

'Be quiet, Lil,' said Roz. 'We mustn't interfere.'

'He's going to kill...Tom wants to kill...'

Then Ian had been down a long time, surely a minute, more...

Tom let out a great yell and let go of Ian, who bobbed up. He was hardly able to stand, fell, stood up again, and watched Tom striding through the waves to the beach. As Tom stepped up on to the sand, blood flowed from his calf. Ian had bitten him, deep under the waves, and it was a bad bite. Ian was standing swaying in the water, choking, gasping.

Roz fought with herself, then ran out into the waves and supported Ian in. The boy was pale, vomiting sea water, but he shook off Roz and went to sit by himself on the sand, his head on his knee. Roz returned to her place. 'Our fault,' whispered Lil.

'Stop it, Lil. That's not going to help.'

Tom was standing on one leg, to examine his calf, which was pouring copious blood. He went back into the sea and stood sloshing the sea water on to the bite. He came out again, found his swimming towel, tore it in half, and tied one half tight around his leg. Then he stood, hesitating. He might have gone back into his house and through it to Lil's. He might have stayed in his own house, claiming it from Ian? He could have flopped down where he stood near the fence, not far from the women. Instead he turned and stared hard, it seemed with curiosity, at Ian. Then he limped to where Ian sat, and sat down by him. No one spoke.

The women stared at these two young heroes, their sons, their lovers, these beautiful young men their bodies glistening with sea water and sun oil, like wrestlers from an older time.

‘What are we going to do, Roz?’ whispered Lil.

‘I know what I am going to do,’ said Roz, and stood up. ‘Lunch,’ she called, exactly as she had been doing for years, and the boys obediently got up and followed the women into Roz’s house.

‘You’d better get that dressed,’ said Roz to her son. It was Ian who fetched the box of bandages and Elastoplast and put disinfectant on the bite, and then tied up the wound.

On the table was the usual spread of sausages and cheese and ham and bread, a big dish of fruit, and the four sat around the table and ate. Not a word. And then Roz spoke calmly, deliberately. ‘We all have to behave normally. Remember—everything must be as usual, as it always is.’

The boys looked at each other, for information, it seemed. They looked at Lil. They looked at Roz. They frowned. Lil was smiling, but only just. Roz cut an apple into four, pushed a quarter each to the others, and bit juicily into her segment.

‘Very funny,’ said Ian.

‘I think so,’ said Roz.

Ian got up, clutching a big sandwich stuffed with salad, the apple quarter in his other hand, and went into Roz’s room.

‘Well,’ said Lil, laughing with something like bitterness.

‘Exactly,’ said Roz.

Tom got up, and went out and across the street to Lil’s house.

‘What are we going to do?’ Lil asked her friend, as if she expected an answer, there and then.

‘It seems to me we are doing it,’ said Roz. She followed Ian into her bedroom.

Lil collected up the box with the medicaments and bandages, and walked across to her house. On the way she waved to Saul Butler, who was on his verandah.

School began: it was the boys’ last year. Both were prefects, and admired. Lil was often in other towns and places, judging, giving prizes, making speeches, a well-known figure, this slim, tall, shy woman, in her pale perfect linens, her fair hair smooth and neat. She was known for her kind smile, her sympathy, her warmth. Girls and boys had crushes on her and wrote letters that often included, ‘I know that you would understand me.’ Roz was supervising productions of musicals at a couple of schools, and working on a play, a farce, about sex, a magnetic noisy woman who insisted that her bite was much worse than her bark: ‘So watch out; don’t make me angry!’ The four were in and out, together or separately, nothing seemed to have changed, they ate their meals with windows open on the street, they swam, but sometimes were by themselves on the beach because the boys were out surfing, leaving them behind.

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