

Sandra Marslund

## The Other Couple

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5 The first time I see them is at breakfast. They are seated either side of a small table in the far corner of the hotel dining room, a man and a woman. He is richly tanned with a plume of silvery hair, and there's something dapper about his manner, his straight back, the gold cufflinks glinting from his checked shirt, the way he severs his boiled egg in one smooth gesture. The woman is short and waiflike, her skin sallow in a faded yellow T-shirt, ash grey hair rolled tight in a bun at the base of her neck. Her hands tremble as she pours her tea. My eyes linger on them, a little too long, because the receptionist had told us there was no one else staying here.

"Thought we had the place to ourselves?" I whisper as I pull out my chair.

10 "We do," you say. "Great isn't it?" And I think how annoying it is that you never notice anything, never look beyond what's right in front of you.

You have picked a table in the alcove facing the beach. Before us the sea is a slab of wet steel in the early morning light and for a moment I lose myself in its greyness. A girl comes to take our order. You go for the full English<sup>1</sup> and I wonder at how quickly you've got your appetite back, when I have none. I order the fruit salad and the girl snaps our menus from us before you can protest.

15 "So... Penryn Point<sup>2</sup> today?" you say, spreading your map across the table. "If we get a shifty on<sup>3</sup> we could be there by lunch." I watch your finger trace a line across a creamy landmass.

"Or we could stay here," I say, "in that cove." You fold the map back into a neat rectangle and tuck it under your plate.

"And do what?"

20 "Relax," I say. "Maybe talk?"

"Don't you want to see the seals?" I shrug and pick at a stray thread on the tablecloth.

25 "They say they're so close you can touch them." Your voice is an octave higher than usual, and I know then that you too are pretending. I know it in the flick of your fingers as you brush a speck of dirt from the table, in the way your eyes avert from mine. I know it in the rigged smile you give the waitress when she brings our breakfasts.

"Penryn Point it is then," I say. "I've never seen a seal up close."

When we get up to leave, I notice the other people have gone. Their table has been cleared and reset for dinner with gleaming plates and long-stemmed glasses, as though no one was ever here. I think how easy it is for people to erase a presence.

30 That evening you insist on the local pub. I don't want to go, my feet sore and swollen from our hike. Just one, you say. Do you good, and you drag me towards the entrance. The inside is all chipped mahogany and thick red carpet, a reek of stale beer and air freshener. It's still early and apart from a couple of old men hunched at the bar, we're the only ones here. While you get the drinks I settle in a small wooden nook at the far end of the pub. A few tables further back, a couple is eating fish and chips and the air is tinged with fat and vinegar. I realise it's the couple from this morning. I recognise his sprightly frame, her quiet stoop. 35 He is drinking a pint of Guinness<sup>4</sup> while she sips a tomato juice. Her back is turned to me, but I have a clear view of him. He is overdressed for this pub, I think, in a green flannel shirt, and whenever he sips his Guinness he lays down his fork and pats his lip with a paper napkin. I try to catch their eye, to smile, but neither of them look up.

40 "Got you one of these," you say and plonk a glass of something clear and sparkling on the table, a lime wedged on the side.

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<sup>1</sup> *full English*: breakfast with bacon and eggs

<sup>2</sup> *Penryn Point*: tourist attraction in the South West of England

<sup>3</sup> *get a shifty on*: hurry

<sup>4</sup> a type of beer

“But I asked for juice...”

45 “Drink it.” You slump opposite and gulp down your pint until your glass is almost empty. The alcohol stings my tongue. I cough and take another sip, feeling the warmth slide down my throat and expand in my stomach. You smile at me and I reach across the table for your hand.

“Listen...”

“No, don’t start.”

“But...”

“We said we wouldn’t talk about it on holiday.”

50 “No YOU said.” I yank my hand away.

“I’m not sure,” you say, running your fingers through your hair, “that I can go through it all again.” Your voice is quiet and for a moment our eyes lock, the air between us thick as tar. I take in the crevices in your forehead, the grey coils at your temples, the slight tremble in your fingers as they pinch the froth from your lips.

55 “We could travel,” you say, “live abroad. Anything you want...” I fix my eyes on the old couple. Watch their heads nod and bob over their plates, the tandem glide of forks to their mouths.

“Can we go?” I say. “The smell of those chips is making me feel sick.”

“What chips?” you say and knock back the dregs of your pint.

60 I’m restless in the night. I sit up coughing and thirsty for air. The alcohol has given me a head. I know you’re awake too. I can hear it in the weight of the outbreaths leaving your body, steady and embittered through the axle of your ribs.

“Hey,” you whisper into the darkness. Your palm presses in the small of my back.

65 “We’re supposed to be focusing on what we have, not what we don’t have. Remember?” I lift the flaccid folds of my tummy and run my fingers through their spongy creases. I think back to the taut roundness, the little ripples and punches across its milky surface and I have to put my hands down to steady myself. My nails dig into the hard mattress.

“It’s going to be ok,” you say, your thumb stroking my back.

“I know,” I say. But it will never be ok.

70 The following morning the sea is a vista of smashed glass in the bright sun. It’s unseasonably warm. Too warm for walking. You concede to a day at the beach and we throw our towels on a patch of sand between two rocks. You lie on your back and tug your baseball cap over your face. I pull out a book, but my gaze is drawn to a group of women who have set up camp at the far end of the cove. They appear to have at least two or three children apiece and have surrounded themselves with all manner of paraphernalia; towels, nappy bags, inflatable animals of varying kinds, bottles of suntan lotion, picnic hampers and thermos flasks, paper cups and plates, all spilling onto the sand around them. Some of the women are clearly pregnant, others just waistless, arms like hams swinging by their sides as they trudge to and from the water’s edge shouting commands. *Where’s your hat? Where’s your ball? You’ve been on that thing long enough, let Edward have a go.* In between they address one another in raised voices.

“I tried zinc ointment but it didn’t work...”

80 “Ellie only managed once on the potty...”

“Not sure I’ll go back to work now...” My chest tightens at their maternal swagger. Why here? Why now? I think as I watch their giant playground seep into our space in this quiet spot with the bright water and the black-limbed shore pines and the gorse growing crookedly from the grey rocks. I look around, thinking we could move further down the beach, and that’s when I spot them. The other couple. Sitting by the side of a rock on two folding chairs. He in a white Fedora reading a copy of *The Times*<sup>5</sup>, its pages billowing in the breeze. His bare feet poke from rolled-up trousers, his toenails yellow and cracked against mottled skin. She is in a cream short-sleeved blouse and a full blue skirt, which she has hoisted over a pair

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<sup>5</sup> *The Times*: British newspaper

of bulbous knees. She is gazing at the sea, her face set in a pinched frown. I think of us. Twenty years from  
90 now. No heritage, no trace, just blue-tinged tendons and TV dinners, your bony fingers snagging on the  
knots in my hands. And my world feels frail as theirs, scary in its lightness, like I'm just pieces of a woman  
scattered here in the sea wind.

I must have drifted off, because I wake to find the sun has shifted and its rays are now burning the side  
of my face. Your eyes are closed, your mouth open and your head has tilted to one side. I stretch my legs  
95 out over the towel and curl my toes, feeling the sand crumb and fold over my feet. The wind has turned  
and out in the distance the water has begun to rise and coil, like it's backing onto itself. The tide is coming  
in, I think, because the gap between our towels and the water's edge has shrunk to just a few metres and  
the lick of the water is getting closer. The women and kids have gone and the far side of the beach is  
empty. The man is still there, eyes closed, head drooping. But there's no sign of her.

A couple of surfers are out on the breakers, black silhouettes in the fierce light, swooping and gliding  
100 across the water. To the left a silvery figure is walking in the shallows. I recognise the bunched shoulders,  
the hooked back. I think how brave she is to go for a swim in this swell. Then I notice she is still fully  
dressed, wading deeper and deeper into the water, her blue skirt a parachute around her waist. A wave  
catches her and drags her backwards, but she redresses herself and pushes on ahead, arms lifting in the air  
as the edges of her blouse darken and hug her skin. Any moment, I think, any moment now she will turn  
105 back. But on and on she goes, her body almost submerged, her head and shoulders dipping in the ripples.

"Hey!" I shout and run into the shallows, but my voice is weak and tinny in the wind. She becomes a  
black pinprick, a buoy on the water, hard to decipher now in the curl and swill of foam. I want to follow. I  
think I can catch up with her, perhaps, if I push myself. The water is a shock of cold, but I release my footing  
and let the surge drag me until I'm up to my waist. I try to swim, but the waves just toss me sideways,  
110 willing me back towards the shore. Somewhere I hear a hollow cry, a wail of someone's name, over and  
over again. I force my way back in, arms flailing and thrashing against the rush and tug of water. Salt stings  
the back of my throat and I sink between darkness and light, water filling my ears, my hands extended  
ready to grab floating limbs and grey hair. But all I see there in the tubes of blue, are tiny unfurled fingers,  
eyes glued shut, the yellow of the fleece I will never unwrap.

115 Shirt-sleeved arms haul me backwards and your face appears through the blur of water. You wrench me  
to my feet and we stand there, our breath heavy and rasping, our clothes clinging to our skin. I swivel from  
the beach towards the sea and back again, my eyes scanning and searching. But there is nothing and no  
one but you and I, and the endless unblemished horizon and the hiss of the waves fizzing on the sand.

(2018)