

Sex

None of it need have happened.

It started in a typically roundabout way, on a single weekend in the first summer of the new millennium (counting as most people did). Three different women, in three different places, found themselves preoccupied—for their own good reasons—with a man called Walter Harlan.

The unlikeliest was Kate Orville-Brown, on Jersey. She was sitting in the garden with her daughter Emma, late one Friday afternoon, idly flicking through the pages of the prospectus of the university which Emma was about to go to, when her eye was caught by his name.

“Walter Harlan!” she exclaimed.

“Who?” Emma asked.

“Professor Walter Harlan. It says here he’s the dean of your faculty. I used to know him.”

Emma took another sip of her Pimm’s. The glass was cool; it sparkled at the rim. “When was this?” she asked. Since her mother didn’t reply straightaway, she sat back in her deckchair and waited.

Framing her mother’s head was a Giotto sky, with just a few puffy clouds. Jersey’s weather, like lots of other things on the island, is more French than English. All the same, it had been a miserable summer. This Friday’s sun had turned up like the ally people had given up on. It was apparently here for the weekend.

And then for how much longer? Under people’s casual complaints about the weather there lurked, as always, a desperate longing: for a real summer, before the long dark nights came back.

Some of this may have lent an extra edge to Kate’s feelings. “Walter Harlan!” her daughter heard her say to herself, as she stared, lost in thought, towards the sea—which both of them could glimpse between trees and some lower houses, glittering in the distance.

She shook her head in private concentration. Then she went quite still. The next moment, with a scrape of her steel chair on the flagstones, she got up. Emma stopped bracing herself against boredom, and started to feel curious.

“Are you all right, Mummy?” she asked.

“Yes, of course,” her mother nodded, not looking at her.

She'd just had a bad shock. As in one of those speeded-up films, a flower of anguish had burst into life inside her, For a second she'd been the Kate whose life held Walter Harlan, with the younger woman's hopes and dreams, and her sheer excitement at being alive. She was there, in that lost world. She could taste the haze of those summer months in London. Then in what seemed to be the same second she was back here, in this garden with her grown-up daughter, a woman of forty-four, with nothing in her mouth except the taste of loss.

It was almost too much to bear. Emma watched, not sure what had happened. Her mother had lost colour, and put the prospectus down almost jerkily.

"Mummy?" she asked.

Kate gave her a look. It held meanings which Emma should have been too young to grasp. But while there are people who hesitate in reading foreign languages, and are always translating words back into the one language they are comfortable with, there are also people who take new languages in their stride, and think in them as though the foreign words were their own. In the same way there are people who, from an early age, find it simple to take on other people's emotional worlds. Emma gave her mother a straightforward smile, of understanding verging on complicity, and for Kate, all the hurt drained away from her feeling.

She was left with something poignant, a skin-prickling nostalgia, deeper than tears, which she wanted to keep close to her for a moment. She wandered away across the lawn towards her lovingly tendered flower beds.

Emma picked up her mobile phone, which had been next to her sunglasses on the table beside her. But there was no one she really wanted to call. She put it back, and stretched a little in the sun, watching her mother, barefoot, in her short cotton shift, stroll among her own flowers.

There were a lot of them. Some of them reflected Kate's childhood on the mainland: love in a mist, dahlias, gladioli. Drooping delicate red fuchsia, tall white marguerites, lavender. (Kate broke off a sprig, and sniffed it.) Three trellises of roses: white, peach, red. There were also flowers which made a different statement. Kate's favourites were her *tigridia pavonia*, popularly known as 'tiger flowers'—exotic plants which bloomed yellow or shocking pink for just one day. She contemplated today's arrivals.

Slowly, the sweetness ebbed out of her feeling, as the pain had earlier. She was left with a kind of puzzlement. What had she got to do with that younger Kate, who'd had such an eye-opening time with Walter Harlan? She was another person, surely. So what was a 'person'?

A motorbike thrummed by, on the road at the front of the house. In the warm silence which followed, Kate could hear the rustle of leaves from the trees around her, and some way off, sea birds screeching. Birdsong in general died down in August, but living so close to the sea, she could count on oyster-catchers and gannets.

At Royal Holloway, she'd done a combined degree. With Harlan, a young lecturer who'd only been in post for a couple of years, she'd studied Greek tragedy. She'd also read Italian literature. Thinking now about what it meant to be a 'person', how a life could stretch itself out so variably, her mind wandered to Dante, and the first canto of the *Inferno*. It seemed to her that given how long people—especially women—lived nowadays, she must still be 'in the middle of the journey'. Had she also lost "*la speranza dell'altezza*"?

She shook the thought away. Of course not. The second half of her life had every reason to be as rich and happy as the first. Growing into middle age with Edward was going to be an adventure. Emma might be leaving home, but she'd never lose touch. And England lay barely a hundred miles off. Some day, perhaps, there'd be grandchildren. Kate brightened at the thought.

She sniffed her lavender again. A light breeze brought her a cluster of other familiar scents. The years ahead might not all be plain sailing, she reflected. Cancer or a bad accident might be lying in wait. But what was the point in worrying about what might never happen? She glanced across the lawn at Emma, who seemed to have given up staring at her, and was now basking in the sun—the shadow cast by her deckchair on the patio as sharp as if it had been etched.

A strange girl, Kate thought. Her own daughter, grown into a friend, close to her in a way which she'd been too realistic to dream of when she was younger. From here, she looked like any other nineteen year old: the jeans, the lime green top which left her midriff bare. And yet a strange girl—strange at nineteen as she'd been strange at seven. Too observant, too understanding. Too much *to* her.

She remembered being woken by her, years ago, when Emma was barely a toddler. She'd held her for a while in her arms. Looking into the little girl's wide eyes, in the dim blue of a night light, she'd been struck by the feeling that this wasn't her own child, grown cell by cell in her own body. This child came from outer space.

Even at the time, she'd thought that the reflection wasn't like her. The next day, her more rational self, she'd explained it away as an attack of late-night whimsy.

Of course, she thought now, looking round the garden till she was held by the shimmer on their blue swimming pool, there'd been a rational basis for her odd experience. The earth wasn't at the centre of the universe, as Dante had so comfortably thought. It was just one planet among an uncountable number. We are all creatures from outer space.

Emma, sucking on a cube of ice and watching her mother again, saw her touch her hair vaguely. What on earth was she thinking about? Had there been something between her and this Harlan bloke?

"What are you thinking about?" she called across the lawn.

Her mother wandered slowly back, seeming to like the feel of the grass under her feet. “I was thinking what an odd girl you are,” she said, as she came close enough for Emma to hear.

“What’s that got to do with this chap Walter Harlan?”

Kate sat down, dropping the lavender on the white iron table and picking up her own Pimm’s. “Nothing,” she said.

“But that was what set you off.”

“Well, I met him when I was your age. And I was a normal naïve nineteen year old, not a weird busy-body like you.”

Emma could have asked, “How do you mean, ‘busy-body?’” Instead she said, “You’re trying to distract me.”

“There you go again. You’re too smart for your own good.”

Emma ran her fingers through her long red hair. “Did he get his leg over?”

Kate stared at her in mock horror. “Even if you have to use such an awful expression, do you really think that’s a proper question for a young woman to ask her mother?”

Her tone was severe. Emma wasn’t fooled. “Well, did he?” she persisted.

Kate made up her mind to lie. “No,” she said, reaching for her sunglasses. “Nothing like that happened.”

“But you did fancy him?”

“I had a sort of schoolgirl crush.”

“At nineteen?”

“I didn’t start as early as you.”

Emma had been on the pill since she was sixteen. To begin with, they’d kept it a secret from Edward. But they were too close a family to keep secrets from one another for very long. It came out; he was shaken; then he accepted it—as he accepted everything that couldn’t be changed.

The thought was in both their minds. But Emma was still curious about what had gone on between her mother and Harlan. “What was he like?” she asked.

“He was very intelligent, very knowledgeable.” Kate paused. She saw the man again as he’d been then, just walking down a corridor without knowing that he

was being observed. Walking at his own pace, head up, loose-limbed. “Quite good-looking,” she conceded.

Now she saw him as he’d been in bed: the curly hair covering his chest, the stubble on his chin, the dark watchful eyes, the smile which came from nowhere.

She must have given something away to Emma. “Was this before Daddy?” her daughter asked.

“Oh yes. I didn’t meet Daddy until my third year. This was in my first year at university.”

“How long did it last—this ‘crush’?” There was an edge to Emma’s question which made her mother feel that she’d seen through her. As usual.

“Oh, I don’t know. A few months. I got interested in boys of my own age.” Another lie. Harlan had ended it. Gently, but unambiguously.

“Didn’t you want to sleep with him?”

“It never occurred to me.”

“Mummy, this was the 1970s, not the 1890s! You were on the pill. You’ve told me.”

“He was married, for one thing.”

Not that she’d hesitated for a moment, in reality. She didn’t imagine, either, that she was the first young woman to be drawn to the darkness which smouldered in this particular married man. Just as she was sure that she wasn’t the last, even if no whisper reached her. Harlan managed to keep everything discreet. He’d made her feel that it would be a desecration to tell anyone else about the affair—even after he’d broken it off.

She could feel Emma’s eyes resting on her—those greeny-blue eyes which saw too much. “Do you regret it?” Emma asked.

“What—regret the crush, or regret not sleeping with him?”

“Mummy...” Emma spoke the word with the lightest of reproaches.

“No,” Kate said, hoping still to be saved by ambiguity. “No, I don’t regret it. It was a pure gift. It was one of the deepest experiences of my life.” She added, feeling that she might already have gone too far, “It made me ready for Daddy when he came along.”

“Were they like each other—Daddy and this bloke?”

Kate thought about it. “Not really. Walter Harlan was more of an academic—and not so stable. But that isn’t right,” she rejoined, shaking her head. “Harlan was as solid as you can get. It’s just that there was a lot *to* him. He made *you* feel unstable. He was a bit scary, really.”

“Not something you could say about Daddy.”

“No, thank goodness. He’s a nicer person in every way.”

Emma stretched again. “Are we going to have another Pimm’s?”

Kate was about to say, “Let’s wait for Daddy.” Since he was off to Singapore again next week, it was a safe guess Edward would be home in good time today. Then they both heard the rattle of the garage door opening.

They listened to the MG being driven in. Now they could also hear faint French pop music from Marie Louise’s bedroom on the other side of the house, and the sound of a lawnmower next door. Their own lawn needed mowing, Kate thought—though it might be better to wait till it had thoroughly dried out.

There was a rattle as the garage door closed, and a moment later, having made his way through the house from the connecting door, the man himself appeared at the open French windows.

“Edward!” Kate called warmly.

To her, he was still ‘Edward’. He’d always been Edward, or Ed at the nineteenth hole. It was when Eddie George began making his mark at the Bank of England that one of their friends had started calling him ‘Eddie’. Other friends took it up; it had stuck. Kate’s husband now thought of himself as Eddie, most of the time.

Blinking at the sun, he ambled across the patio. He was about the same height as Harlan, Kate thought. A longer, more mobile face. Most of the deep ridges came from smiles. Greying hair (though Harlan’s would be too, by this time, she imagined.)

He bent down to kiss her, then came round the table to Emma.

“I see you’ve been making good use of the money I bring in,” he said. “Is this your second, or your third?”

“It’s our first,” Kate protested, knowing he’d like her to. “We were waiting for you before we had a second.”

“Decent of you,” Eddie replied. “Do I have to make them?”

“*I’ll* make them,” said Emma, levering herself out of her deckchair.

“The fruit’s all cut,” said her mother. “And there’s mint there. I put the cucumber back in the fridge.”

Emma stuck her feet in her sandals, picked up her mobile phone, and clip-clopped off round the house.

Eddie settled himself in the second deckchair. “Is she expecting a call?” he asked Kate.

“I don’t think so,” Kate replied. “She just likes to have it by her.”

“Who is the current young man?”

“Ben—as you know perfectly well. He’s been to the house half a dozen times.”

“Met him, have I?”

Kate merely looked at him. He took another tack. “Is he off to university, too?”

“Yes, Bristol. I have the feeling he and Kate won’t be seeing as much of each other as he’d like.”

“A bit of a handful, isn’t she? I pity the young men, I really do.”

There was something in this throwaway comment for them both to pause on. Their daughter was already her own woman. It wasn’t just her red hair—which, in the way it often does, had jumped a couple of generations. She’d always been an unusual girl. Never easy to influence. Hardly easy to predict.

“I shouldn’t feel so sorry for Ben, anyway,” Kate said. “I’ve no doubt he’ll net some girl from the mainland. He’ll haul her back here and she’ll lead a wickedly happy life.”

She lowered her sunglasses. It was obvious enough she was referring to the two of them. Eddie indicated his appreciation, before coming back to what was still on his mind.

“Why isn’t Emma going to Bristol—or even Cambridge?” he asked—as though they’d never had this conversation before. “She’s bright enough. Why’s she going to this Poly place?”

“It’s not a polytechnic any more—it’s a university. As you well know.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Oh, she’s just lazy—isn’t she?”

“Do you think that’s it?”

“Well, you can never tell with Emma. It could be part of some master plan. But I doubt it somehow. She simply hasn’t made an effort.”

Neither of them were quite happy with this judgement. There’d been times in her childhood when they’d seen her as a bit of a dreamer, because she neglected some commonplace job which they saw as essential. The next thing, she’d carried out her plan successfully—as though charmed.

“You remember how she got all the kids to go on that fast for Oxfam?” Eddie asked.

“How could I forget?”

He gazed at her innocently. “Well, we’re both going to start forgetting things now, aren’t we? What with advancing senility.”

Kate picked up the sprig of lavender and threw it at him. He made as if to ward it off. This was the moment Emma came back with the tray of glasses.

“I can’t leave you two alone for a moment, can I?” she said. “Quarrelling again. How are you going to manage when I go away?”

They laughed. Then caught each other’s eye.

Emma gave them each their Pimm’s a touch self-consciously, alive now to the implications hidden in her jokey question—which had nothing to do with quarrelling. For nineteen years on this island—in just two homes—there’d been three of them. Now there were only going to be two. Assuming Marie-Louise didn’t count.

They clinked their glasses before drinking.

“Perfect,” said Eddie.

“What else did you expect?” Emma asked.

He lifted his glass to her before sipping again. “What are we having for dinner?” he asked Kate.

“Wait and see.”

“I get no respect here, do I?” he protested. “I’m just a sort of dummy, for the two of you to practise your skills on.”

“Shut up, Daddy,” said Emma.

He appealed to Kate. “You see what I mean?”

There was a sudden kerfuffle behind them, from near the pool. A bird's terrified squawking. Emma got up, to see what it was. Eddie and Kate turned round in their chairs.

Their cat, a domestic tabby long past its prime, had caught and was now savaging a bird. A young swallow or house martin, by the look of it. As it fluttered and twisted, frantic to escape, the cat's claws dug into its small feathered body.

It wasn't the first time. Dormant in the old brown furry body were all the instincts of the tiger. "Off, Perry, off!" Eddie shouted and clapped, as he got to his feet. Emma followed him. The cat eventually drew back. But the bird only rocked a little where it lay.

"It needs putting out of its misery," Kate called, from where she was still sitting. Emma looked at her father. Killing was a man's job.

Eddie picked it up, gingerly. A couple of feathers floated down to join those on the ground.

"Can't we do anything for it?" Emma asked.

"Shall I take the vet's bill out of your next allowance?"

"If you like," Emma came back, defiantly.

He shook his head. "It's too late. Perry's done much too good a job. Go back to your mother. I'll deal with it."

He took it round the back of the house. By the dustbins, in their wooden cabin, he wrung its neck, feeling tiny bones break as he twisted. Once he was satisfied that it was dead, he dropped it into one of the bins. He pushed the lid down firmly.

Sensing movement at a first-floor window, he looked up. Behind the dazzle on the glass he could make out Marie Louise, their au pair, looking down at him. She didn't smile, or go away: she just went on looking.

Eddie himself gave her a genial wave, before turning to walk back to Kate and Emma.

He had an odd relationship with Marie Louise, who was much the same age as Emma, and had been with them since January. Not the sort of relationship which a stranger might guess. He'd never so much as touched her—they'd never even brushed past one another, round a table. He didn't flirt with her, either, which for a politely flirtatious man was itself odd.

Something vibrated between them all the same—thin as cotton, springy as steel. It was in her eyes when she looked at him over Kate's head. It was in her body

when they stood aside for one another on the upstairs landing, careful not to come into contact.

He wouldn't have dreamt of having an affair with her, any more than he would have dreamt of having an affair with one of his secretaries, or the wife of one of his friends. He was completely faithful to Kate—at least on the island. There had been one or two liaisons in distant parts, but he didn't count them, and he didn't think Kate would, if she ever got word.

What was it that tautened between him and Marie Louise, then? It wasn't an emotion, not affection; yet it was keener than mere flirtation. She'd sometimes give a knowing little laugh, to herself, when they were in the same room, and she was dusting, or tidying up. Or Eddie might be sitting in a chair, reading a newspaper, as she worked round him. He'd look up when she finished, and was on her way out. She'd lift her arms and twirl her young body in the doorway, as if for her own benefit, before sauntering off.

Emma watched the two of them with the eyes of a border guard, expert at detecting signs of guilt. She herself had a relationship with the au pair which matched his. They did go clubbing together, and so on. But most of the time she treated Marie-Louise as a sparring partner, swapping banter in both English and French.

Kate saw the thought in his face as he came back. "Well done," she said quietly, imagining that it was the bird that had disturbed him. "Sit back in your chair and enjoy your drink."

He did as she suggested. They sat in comfortable silence for a moment. "Mummy's found an old friend," Emma said, pushing the prospectus at him. "He's working at my university."

"Really?" Eddie said.

"Not an old friend," Kate insisted. "Just someone I used to know. Walter Harlan. Did I ever mention him to you?"

"I don't think so. How long ago was this?"

"Oh, years ago."

"Before you met Mummy," Emma chipped in.

"Ah," Eddie said, meaningfully.

"I don't know which is the worse of the two of you!" Kate grimaced. "You seem determined to make a drama out of nothing."

Emma gave her mother a look. She already knew it was more than nothing. "Shall I call on him?" she asked. "Give him your love?"

“Certainly not!” Kate said.

“Would he be embarrassed?” Emma asked.

For the first time Kate pictured the two of them in the same frame—the daughter for whom she felt an admiration so primitive that she couldn’t have uprooted it even if she’d wanted to, and the shaman who’d so long ago added her to his collection—and went as cold as if she’d been dropped into a freezing canal.

“No, neither of you would be embarrassed,” she managed to say. “*I’d* be embarrassed.”

“Then we won’t tell you,” Emma smiled.

If it had been bad for Kate before, that ‘we’ finished her off. She tried to smile back. Just a casual remark, she told herself, on a lovely summer evening in the garden, on an island which was itself a garden, with a bit of a rockery to the north. Nothing was going to come of it.

She didn’t convince herself.

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