

MARLOW BRIDGE IN SUMMER

by Jeremy Worman

My hand sweated on the blue-flowered doorknob of Ma's bedroom. She had been off Valium for a week but talking to her psychotherapist made things worse. Today was the real solution. She was going to finish with her "lover". I hate that word. Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band blared out.

'Morning, Ma.'

I adjusted the items on the tray: china tea in the Mason's green dragon pot; toast and marmalade; a pink rose, which I cut this morning and put in a thin blue-glass vase. The lamp made shadows across her thrown-on-the-floor clothes; as I put the tray on the bedside table a packet of St Moritz menthol cigarettes fell to the floor.

'I'll draw the curtains, Ma.'

'Do you have too?'

I swished them back and sun blazed in. The striped lawn stretched all the way to my cricket net; birds whirled between

high trees. Everything felt like it used to.

‘I want my Beatles record back,’ I said.

‘It’s been out for a year; it’s so cheerful. I love it.’ She poured tea.

‘It was the first LP I bought. It’s mine. Not for your generation.’

‘The Sixties are me, darling.’ She shook her head like she was dancing under disco lights.

‘Ma, really.’

I sat on the bed and she stroked my hair, working her fingers from the parting to the back of my neck.

‘Swimming has made it so blond. Have you seen Suzie Fitzgerald this holidays?’

‘You can see I’ve dressed nicely for today – proper trousers, psychedelic shirt, and I’ll wear my blazer.’

‘Don’t change the subject, and don’t blush. You’re growing up; you’re fourteen, and Suzie is so pretty.’

‘Don’t you change the subject. You must tell Karl Schmidt. Daddy and I can’t stand it anymore. Karl is horrible and makes you bonkers.’

‘Lunch at the Compleat Angler – goodbye Karl – it’s been nice knowing you.’

‘It hasn’t.’

The record had reached the end of ‘With a Little Help From My Friends’.

‘Shall I turn it off?’

‘No.’

‘You put the stylus on by hand, not on automatic, and you haven’t put the arm across, so you need to lift it off or the needle goes on turning in the smooth vinyl.’

‘Worry guts. When I get up.’

I looked out of the window. The sun had gone and the stripes on the lawn were blurred. Ma bit a chunk of toast and Oxford Thick-Cut Marmalade. We talked about normal things, like me playing cricket for the Surrey under-fifteen side next month in Guildford, and Great-Aunt Em’s new beehive hat – and our family holiday to Bordeaux next month.

‘I’ll take the tray. You get ready.’

‘I’m the mother; you’re the boy: I tell you.’

‘I suppose; I was just offering advice.’

‘Get my red patent shoes from the wardrobe – just right for a farewell – as he’s no good for me.’

I blew the dust off them, rubbed the brass buckles for luck, and placed them by the side of the record player.

‘See you in a minute, Ma.’

My father’s cough came up the stairs, surrounded by his body and a brown herringbone sports jacket with a yellow handkerchief in the top pocket.

‘Morning, old chap; all set?’

‘Why aren’t you coming?’

‘Arteriosclerosis, you know that. Mornings are bad.’ His long fingers fiddled with his lapel. ‘Give your mother

moral support. Here's a fiver; a gentleman should always be prepared.'

'Don't you care?'

The oil painting of a man in tweeds shooting a pheasant in flight gazed down at us.

'I'll say good morning to Amelia. You just enjoy the lunch. I had trout in aspic last time. Superb.' He whispered, 'It will all be over soon, old chap.'

I crept next door into Pa's study and prayed to the olive wood Russian icon of the Virgin Mary above his desk. I rubbed my hand across the gold halo: 'Make Ma better and make us a family again. Amen.' I crossed myself. I'm not religious, actually, but I am very spiritual. In the breakfast room I had a bowl of Shreddies, gold-top milk and a cut-up banana.

Twenty minutes later Ma came down in a neat black linen dress with a low neckline. In the hall mirror she tied her horse-patterned silk scarf under her neck. Her shoe buckles sparkled. On the doorstep, Pa kissed her cheek but she pushed him away.

Mother and I walked to the garage.

'Let the campaign begin,' she said.

Ma reversed her pink Alfa-Romeo Spyder into the drive and I jumped into the passenger seat. We zoomed off. Nothing could be sad when the roof was down and a meadow-flower breeze surrounded you.

'Light me a cigarette,' she said as we reached Englefield Green.

I pressed in the car lighter and then puffed before I handed it to her.

As we passed Windsor Race Course, I remembered our picnic last year when I won ten pounds on an each-way double – it would have been more but at the last stride Rough Streak was pipped into second. Salmon sandwiches, champagne and strawberries, parents laughing on the blue-tartan rug, their feet touching. That night Schmidt phoned. My parents rowed and nothing has been right since and Mummy has got to stop seeing him. He was supposed to be her agent. We reached Furze Platt, beyond Maidenhead, where the road opens and the green country is wide. I closed my eyes and stitched together the bright spots of my life but they were covered by wheat fields burning.

'Don't bite your lip, darling; I'll be a good mummy. 'You can love someone, Simon, but it's still not enough.'

'Ma!' The car veered.

She corrected it and we snaked down the leafy road into Bisham and before Marlow Bridge turned right into The Compleat Angler. I looked at Marlow Suspension Bridge, opened in 1832, and built by Charles Tierney Clark. Pa told me all that; he likes history.

'Wasn't that fun, dreamy? It is a beautiful bridge, isn't it? Take a look in the boot.'

I jumped out and lifted it up. ‘What’s the point of that, swimming togs?’

‘You dull old man. They know us here, and can always lend us a room to change. We could swim upstream; it’s good for my nerves.’

‘It’s 11.45. He’ll be here soon.’

‘Clever boy. Let’s have a coffee.’

We sat at a corner in the garden. Ricardo was on duty and took our order.

She stared at the swirling foam around the weir: ‘That’s really gushing from the rain last week – Oh, God, I never turned off the record player; those poor little Beatles are working overtime.’

‘It’s not like that, Ma. The needle turns in the smooth bit until we get home.’

Heavy footsteps stamped behind my head.

‘Hello, Simon. How is our famous young cricketer?’ Karl Schmidt pummelled my shoulder.

I stood up and faced him. ‘Fine, thanks. How are your wife and two daughters, Mr Schmidt?’

He sat down, with his back to the river, and flashed me a crocodile smile as he patted his brown wig.

‘Some business complications in Munich.’ His nostrils hissed.

‘My poor Karl.’ She touched his hand. ‘I must treat you to a cocktail, a Manhattan, that’s our drink, isn’t it?’

‘Stick to sherry, Ma.’

Ricardo came over and she ordered: ‘Two Manhattans and a Coke and ice for master Oliver Cromwell.’

‘I’m so sorry, Karl. I’ve had a good think,’ she said.

Her head dipped like a swan.

‘We must talk contracts, Amelia; Nivea are keen to have you for the new moisturizer ad.’

‘You’ve been saying that for months, Karl, months.’

He looked straight at me. ‘After lunch I talk alone with your mother; we sort out any difficulties.’

‘My mother can speak in front of me, Mr Schmidt. I know the score.’

‘Young Simon, it is not a game of cricket.’

Ricardo put the fiery cocktails in front of them and a small plate of amuse bouche. I always loved them: today it was cucumber gazpacho and devilled quails’ eggs. A good start.

Mother tapped Ricardo’s hand, ‘We’ll have champagne with lunch, the nice bottle, you know, the one I like.’

Ma put her hand on my neck and whispered, ‘My way, darling, my way.’

The special Wednesday fish menu came, and we usually went for that. It was decorated with images of prawns and halibut, lobsters and crabs with sharp claws. I watched Ma and Schmidt’s mouths speak of West End shows, a new Savile Row suit and his daughter’s tennis. Mother lifted her cocktail glass.

‘Our champagne. Lovely.’

The wine waiter showed the label to them. Karl nodded and his shiny dark moustache gleamed like a seal. He looked up at Mother and she said, ‘Give Simon a little; we are celebrating a chapter of our lives.’ Golden bubbles fizzed in our glasses as we studied the Coquille St Jacques; Ma said ‘I am so happy,’ and lifted the glass above her head. I savoured the sea taste of scallop, mixing the white muscle with a touch of orange meat and cheesy-potato-sauce.

For our main course we had all gone for Dover Sole. The wine waiter stood with the second champagne bottle and popped the cork, muffling the sound with his white linen cloth. I whispered ‘Slow down, Ma,’ and Karl said loudly, ‘We will talk alone and all be good friends again.’ Ma scowled at me.

Mother and Karl tilted their heads and champagne poisoned their bloodstreams; their talk circled like an endless spool of film. Other diners got up, to return to their straight-line lives, and our table was like a cut-off island. We finished our main course and no one wanted pudding.

‘Isn’t this wonderful, darling?’ She wound her napkin into a ball and spoke more slowly. ‘Waiter! Creme-de-menthe frappe for me and a Remy Martin for Mr Schmidt. Coffees all round.’

A few minutes later Ricardo brought the drinks. ‘Everything all right, Senora Carver?’

‘Wunderbar,’ she said. She raised her glass and her eye turned green through the liquid.

I stood up. ‘Excuse me, lovely lunch.’

‘Of coourrrse, darling.’

Knives, forks and spoons were silenced as the diners examined us, and my drunk mother, a tasty morsel of gossip. I felt the audience waiting for my move.

I leant towards her, ‘I’ll just have a walk by the river, and please stop drinking.’

She stood up and swigged champagne. ‘I’ll do what I bloody well like.’ She lifted the glass level with her eyes and squinted through it at the next table. ‘Don’t stare. We’re having fun. Cheers.’

I ran down the gravel path and the weir’s rushing water sluiced through me: if only I could leave, if only I were eighteen with money in the bank and my own car. I would drive to John Hearson’s parents near Taunton. They were kind and knew my mother had problems. I stared at the restaurant: ‘Holy Mary, I pray you are watching over Ma and directing her towards Pa and me, and our holiday in Bordeaux. Amen.’ I kicked the heads off red carnations.

‘Simon!’ Ricardo stood over me. ‘You look worried.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘I keep an eye on your mother. See you later?’ He walked away then turned back. ‘Sometimes women in Italy, sensitive, beautiful women, like your mother, go through a bad time. It will pass.’ He smiled.

He walked off. A few minutes later I stood up and turned.

‘Ma!’

At a table by the river, she lay with her head in her arms; her white handkerchief was smudged with mascara; one of her red shoes was stuck in the flowerbed, its heel pointing up.

‘You’ve ruined it all, bully boy, vile boy.’

‘What about you? You’re drunk. Everyone stared.’

‘Trust you to think about yourself.’

‘Please don’t, Mummy. I’ll help you. Where’s Karl?’

‘As if you don’t know.’

‘Has he gone?’

‘Gone. And now my executioners – your father and you – can sleep easy in their beds.’ Her hands flicked at me like talons.

I picked up her shoe. ‘Let’s go for a walk.’

‘Darling boy, I’m so sorry, sorry.’

With my arm round her I managed to walk her over Marlow Bridge, so she didn’t look too shaky if people gawped. At the other side I wedged her on a seat in the public gardens.

‘Have a fag, Ma.’

I pulled a bent St. Moritz from the bottom of her handbag. She lit a match, and wobbled it in front of her mouth, half lit the cigarette and scorch marks browned the sides.

‘Little bastard.’

An elderly lady in a mink coat sniffed as she went past and stared as if we were down-and-outs on Waterloo Station.

I stepped forward. ‘Excuse me, is there a phonebox nearby?’

She stepped on and didn’t answer, and please would she help me, but her feet trotted like a trained horse in blinkers.

Mother tottered and began to weave back to the hotel. One side of her hair stuck out horizontally, and I tried to brush it flat but she pushed me away. Cars passed slowly on the narrow bridge and the occupants gazed through their safe glass screens. She elbowed my chest, broke free, close to a Lotus Cortina, whose male driver had a nice face like a beery second-row forward, so I raised my arm and smiled. He sped on. Mother dashed across and rested against the bridge. She faced me and her lips quivered in a smile that wasn’t really.

‘Hold on, Ma.’

As I began to cross she turned back and clawed at the iron fretwork, her bag spilling lipstick, a comb, and silver shillings.

‘Ma. Stop!’

She kicked off her red shoes, one dropped into the Thames, and she spread her hands wide and pulled herself to the next section. Her foot got a hold in a round patterned iron gap of the bridge, her other leg flayed out. People watched. I rushed across and my arms just caught the top of her legs, but she kicked my chest. I recoiled and saw Ricardo running out of the hotel gates. She had made another upwards footing.

‘Senora Carver, please.’

He got his arms round her stomach. ‘I help you down, we talk.’

Unmoving, she watched the river. Then she inched her way

down. We put her between us and got her back to a corner table in the hotel garden.

‘Where’s a telephone, please?’ I said.

Ricardo stayed with her. I ran to the lobby and phoned my father. He would have to come and get her.

I ran back to Marlow Bridge and leaned over where the suspension chains were low. I took the five-pound note my father had given me and tore it to bits. Wind roughed up smells of ducks, diesel and mud.