

MARNIE

Ian R. MacLeod

If there's anyone currently rivaling Greg Egan for the title of Hottest New Writer of the Nineties to date, it's the author of the bittersweet story that follows, British writer Ian R. MacLeod. Like Egan, MacLeod also had extremely good years in 1990 and 1991, publishing a slew of strong stories in *Interzone* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (with more in inventory at both markets), as well as impressive work in *Weird Tales*, *Amazing*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*; several of those stories made the cut for one or another of the various "Best of the Year" anthologies—in fact, he appeared in three different anthologies with three different stories last year (one of them was "Past Magic," in our Eighth Annual Collection). MacLeod is in his early thirties, and lives with his wife and baby daughter in the West Midlands of England. He has recently given up his day job to write full time, and is working on his first novel, tentatively titled *Burying the Carnival*. We'll be hearing a lot more from him in the years ahead, too.

In "Marnie" he offers us a chilling look at a man grimly determined to follow the advice of that old adage, If At First You Don't Succeed...

I'd arranged things so that I woke up on an ordinary morning. It was November, the winter term. My bedroom curtains were veined with frost and sunlight. And, for a long time, I just lay there, breathing the strange, familiar smells of this house and this bed and my own sleepy body, until the radio alarm lit up with the last pip of the eight o'clock time signal. It was reassuring to find that nothing had really changed. It was just an ordinary morning. I had ordinary things to do.

I got up and went to the bathroom, finding my way unthinkingly. The memories and sensations were crowding in too quickly for me to react,

but, for now, nothing mattered as long as my body knew what to do. Opening doors with just the right pressure, twisting on the shower taps to get the hot water running before stepping in. My skin felt distant as I soaped myself. The contours and textures seemed right, yet didn't belong. I could sense my flesh, yet it was like touching a lover.

But even as I wondered at the strangeness of returning, the feeling was wearing off. The easy movement of my limbs began to seem natural. The full head of hair that I dried with smooth, strong hands that had reached automatically for the towel was no surprise. Age is relative, and one adjusts to its presence. And I reminded myself that I was, in any case, thirty-one— no longer quite young.

I wiped a space in the steamed-up mirror to shave. I recognized my face from the old, cold photographs. Here, moving and alive, I saw that the camera hadn't lied. It was an ungenerous face, the eyes too close, the nose too large. Insincere when it smiled. Pained when it tried to look sincere. I'd never grown used to it, and, seeing it again, with the deepened knowledge of what age would do, made me wonder—just as I had done all those years back, just as I had always done—exactly *what* Marnie had seen in me.

The shaving foam was Tesco's own, from the big store by the roundabout. The razor was a Bic. I marvelled at the rightness of the period detail, the barcodes and the price stickers still on the side. It seemed almost a pity to use them, like ransacking a museum. Brut 33 aftershave in a green plastic bottle on the shelf over the sink. Had people still used that stuff in the late 1980s? I unscrewed the silver cap and splashed some on my chest and face, smiling faintly at the thought of the advert they used to run. It was all coming back to me now. All of it. The dark, sweet smell of the aftershave. The toothpaste and brush in a broken-handled Charles and Diana mug. And, beside that, sitting just as naturally on the shelf, was a small bottle of Elizabeth Arden cleanser. Everything about the bottle, the casual thought with which Marnie had doubtless left it for next time, the screw top jammed on at a typically careless angle, hit me hard. I reached out to hold the bottle, touching where her fingers had touched. This was real enough. There was nothing to grin at, point at. This wasn't a museum.

Marnie, I thought. Marnie. Look again. She's all around you. Long strands of her blonde hair in the plughole. A half box of Tampax in the cabinet by the sink. The lipstick remains of *I love you* written on the tiles above the bath showing up through the condensation even though some tidy insanity had made me wipe it off with white spirit. Marnie: the

thought that had filled and haunted my whole life. Marnie. Marnie. *Marnie*.

I got dressed, finding my socks and underpants tucked neatly in the right drawer. Hello, old friends. Then cords, a warmish grey cotton shirt, and a loosely knotted woollen tie that was a concession to my position at the University. Looking at myself fully dressed in the long wardrobe mirror, I felt ticklish threads of the ridiculous pulling once again at my mind. That collar, those cords! And that *tie*. I hadn't remembered looking quite as foolish as *this*. But memories change to suit the present.

I took breakfast listening to the plummy-voiced newscasters on Radio Four. I'd long forgotten the details, but nothing in the news came as a surprise, any more than it had been a surprise to find cartons of orange juice and milk waiting from yesterday in the fridge, or cartons of sugar-free muesli in the fitted cabinets, slit open and re-sealed neatly and precisely according to the instructions.

I was in two minds about whether to walk or drive to work. The walk was easy enough, but when I toured my house, touching and remembering all those old possessions, I spent longer in the garage than anywhere else, despite the winter chill. There, still looking clean and new, was my car, my pride and joy, the pinnacle of my overdraft. A Porsche: black and glossy as dark water. I'd forgotten just how proud I'd been of it, but that all came back as soon as I saw it and touched it and smelt it. After brooding at the wheel for some time, gazing at the slumbering dials, I decided it was better to be cautious on this first day. After all, I hadn't driven anything remotely like it for twenty years.

After brushing my teeth, I pulled on a tweed jacket that would, if my life proceeded as it had before, be stolen from under my seat at a cinema in Southport two years later.

The chilly, sunlit air beyond my front door was full of the city. It was a short walk to campus. I lived... *live* in a close of small and expensive modern semis built as an infill in one of the huge gardens of the big older houses that still characterized this area around the University. Most of my neighbours were young, like me, professional and well-paid, like me, single or married or living together, but always childless. Like me.

Even in this pretty, tree-lined area, the smells of parkland and old leaves were half-drowned, to my newly sensitized nose, by the metallic reek of car fumes. I had two main roads to cross. Both were filled with a dangerous, sluggish stream of cars. Startled by the bleep of the pelican crossing and urged on by an impatient old lady, I realized it hadn't been a mistake to

leave the Porsche in the garage.

The interlinking suburban roads were nicer, more as I remembered them. Landscaped gardens and mock-Tudor gables. There were schoolchildren piling into ugly Volvos in driveways, and joggers and students walking, and students on bikes. This was my usual route, and many of the faces were familiar, people I passed day after day without acknowledgement. Everything was so neat, so orderly, so *expected*.

I went through the west gate into the campus. Staff and students drifted and talked and walked in the grassy spaces between the red brick and concrete. Faces came out at me from the past. I was a fixture here, part of the crew. Norman Harris from the Chancellor's office nodded in my direction as he walked away from his Sierra. Then I saw Stephanie Kent hurrying up the wide granite steps of the library, the same old woolen skirt tight as ever over the ample ridges of her knickers. And there was Jack Rattle, my own Head of Department, the latest Penguin in one hand and a sandwich box in the other.

We converged at the swing doors leading to the Graphic Arts Faculty. I held them open for him.

"Morning, Daniel," he said. "Another day, eh? Another few brain cells gone."

"Hardly any left," I said; it didn't sound right, but then I'd never really known how to respond to Jack. I wondered if he'd said the same thing to me on this same day all those years ago, and what my reply had been.

"You must," he tapped my elbow with the corner of his sandwich box, "you *must* show me what we're getting from that new plotter. Damn thing cost us enough."

"Sure. Just say when."

"I will. I will." Jack wandered off down the admin corridor to his own office, passing in and out of frames of window sunlight. I paused for a moment beneath the frescoes at the foot of the marble stairs, watching him, wondering if it was foreknowledge or if the signs were really there that his heart would kill him in the spring.

A few students pushed past me as I dawdled, huffy and in a rush. In the sixties and seventies, any arts faculty would have been filled with campus peacocks even this deep into winter term, but now, with the odd green-haired exception, the students were heavy with overcoats, anxiety, and books, just like all the trainee lawyers and engineers in the other faculties. Like everyone else, they wanted their grades, they wanted a job,

they wanted money.

I checked my watch. It was 9:35. That was just right; my tutorial should have started at half past. Although it was quite impossible that anyone could find me out, I nevertheless felt it was important to give nothing away by changing my habits.

My legs were suddenly a little weak as I took the stairs to the second level: a strong and unexpected return of the feeling that my body didn't *belong* to me. In a sense, of course, it *didn't*, but I pushed that thought down as I passed the Burne-Jones stained-glass and the fire hydrants at the stair turns. This was not the time to hesitate, not when I had a tutorial to get through. Just don't think, I told myself. It worked well enough before.

Along the waxed gleam of the east corridor. Notice boards and past students' efforts on the walls. Rooms 212, 213, 213A, 214.

214. I took a deep breath and walked in. The chatter ceased reluctantly. The air smelt a little of someone's BO, and a lot of the plastic of the computer terminals that had only been in place since the start of the term.

"Good morning." I powered up the master screen, proud of the swift and easy way my hands moved across the switches and keys. "This week we'll continue our exploration of the ways we can expand from the basic paintbox options..."

I paused and looked around at the faces, half-familiar now as they had been then. From the bored expressions, it was obvious that they accepted me without question. I knew that I'd passed a test; my nerves were loosening by the moment. I continued talking at a brisk pace, hardly referring to my notes.

Living in the past was easy.

I closed the tutorial at eleven, and the students drifted out, leaving the garish perspective tricks that the inexperienced or untalented generally produce shimmering on their screens. The computer was still logged for our use, and they could have continued, but, for all of them, the novelty of pressing keys to make things happen on a screen had worn off. Too lazy to walk around the room and look (and how quickly the habits of my lecturing days were coming back!), I called their efforts up, reduced to quarter windows, on my own screen, and saved them for next week's session, unthinkingly hitting the right keys. View, Save, Name, Return. It was an oddly absorbing task, and probably the first time this morning that, with the success of the tutorial behind me, I'd felt completely at home.

The students had left the door open, and Marnie entered the room without my noticing. She'd crept up close behind me before I knew, suddenly, that she was there—and that she was real.

It was strange, to come this far and then to be almost taken by surprise. She put her arms around my neck. Her hair brushed my face. I could smell the shampoo and acacia, and the cigarette she'd just smoked, and the wool of her scarf, and the faint, bitter sweetness of her breath.

"When are you going to give this up," she said, her voice serious but trickling down with every word towards laughter. "Why don't you let the machines get on with it?"

"Could I be replaced that easily?"

"That's right," she said. Her hands pressed against my chest, then suddenly released. "... old boffin like you..." She spun the chair around so that I faced her. "... and how is the old boffin anyway?"

"Same as yesterday," I said. "Let's have coffee."

Marnie's good mood was frail, as I knew it would be. She walked with her head down as we crossed the bright, busy campus, like a child aiming to miss the cracks in the pavement. I'd have liked to have taken her hand, just to be touching her, but I knew it wasn't the sort of thing we'd usually done.

We queued in the cafeteria. Marnie was silent and I couldn't think of anything to say. The woman at the till shook her head and gave me a funny look when I offered my Visa card to pay for the coffee. I don't think Marnie noticed. We took our cups over to an empty table by the window that two Arab students had just vacated. The plastic seat felt warm. I was noticing these things, the steam rising from the slowly spinning froth of the coffee, and the way someone had spooned the sugar to one side of the bowl that lay between us: with Marnie, everything was more vivid. It always had been.

"Is this a busy day?" she asked, lifting the cup with both hands, blowing with that beautiful mouth, sipping. A little of the froth stayed on the faint down along her top lip.

"We could be together, if you like."

"That could be nice," she said.

"Could?"

"Depends on what sort of let's-be-together-day it is." "I love you, Marnie." For thirty years, I'd been wanting to say those words to her

again.

She put the cup down with a slight bang. Her eyes travelled across my face, onwards to the window, the wandering students amid the winter-bare trees, the big buildings beyond. "I don't feel right in this place," she said. "All this architecture. Look at the people out there. Standing, wandering around, talking. It's all such a pose. You know, like one of those architect's drawings you see. Prospective developments. And little sketches of people in the foreground... imaginary people doing imaginary things, just to give the whole neat concept a sense of scale. It's not *real*, people standing around like that, you only ever get anything actually like it at a university."

"It's just a place," I said. "We're both here. You. Me. That's real enough."

"And this is going to be a you-and-me day?"

"I'd like it to be," I said.

"I've got a couple of lectures and a life study I could skip." "Then," I said, "there's no problem."

She didn't reply. There was still froth on her lip and I wanted to mention it, but knew I shouldn't. This whole thing was doubly confusing: my searching for the right words to bridge the awkwardness that was already between us was compounded by the continued vague promptings of memory, a feeling of drifting in and out of the flow. I'd imagined that it would be easy to draw things away from the patterns of the past, but Marnie was still the same, and, now that I was here, I was surprised at how little I had changed. I decided that the best thing was to take a new tack, and say those things to her that I'd always wanted to say.

I swallowed some coffee. Another distraction. I'd forgotten the way the university coffee used to taste. Something about it always reminded me of floormops. I was like Proust, but instead of drifting away into memory I was choking and drowning in tea-soaked madeleines.

"I've been thinking," I said, "... about the way we've allowed things to... drift. I've been a fool to forget that I loved you. Love you... no, I never *forgot* that, but things got in the way. Let's ignore the last couple of weeks. It's just history, a little time in our lives. The arguments don't matter if we have each other."

She glanced back at me from the window as though she was coming back from another world. I checked my irritation. No rows, not this time.

"I'm a bit hung-over," she said. "Honesty time. I was pissed last night."

“With your friends.”

She shrugged. “With people. They’re not *you*, Dan, don’t worry. I’d like to give things a chance, I really would, if we could get it back. When I saw you this morning, sitting in front of that damn screen of yours, it was—”

Her gaze went up. Something slapped my back.

“Dan! Mind if I join you?”

A chair rasped over from the nearest table before I could answer. Ritchie Hanks—one of the specialists who took care of the university mainframe—plonked his heavy, boyish self down.

He glanced at Marnie. I wasn’t sure whether they’d ever met—my memory failing me again. There was a gratifying moment of hesitation, as the thought that maybe he’d interrupted something passed briefly in ones and zeros through Ritchie’s computer-specialist’s brain. But he wasn’t easily put off when he had a story to tell about some fascinating new glitch he’d found in the system.

We listened politely. I asked a few questions so that he could give the answers he wanted. Marnie was on her best behaviour: none of the sly asides that I’d found so amusing when I’d first known her but had since come to dread. None of that mattered, I told myself, not here in the past, not when I knew that Ritchie would have a private sector job on double the pay by the end of next year and I’d never think of him again, or whilst Marnie... but it did. Everything mattered.

“Anyway,” I said, stopping him quickly before he began a different story. “I’d better be going now. Pressure of work, you know how it is.”

“Sure, Dan. Pressure of work. Never stops, does it. I was only—”

“—that’s right.” I moved to stand. “Marnie, are you coming?”

“Well...” she hesitated and looked at me. Just her joke. Of *course* she’d come instead of staying with a prat like Ritchie. Wouldn’t she?

She smiled. “I have some work to do. Us students have work too.”

“Students,” Ritchie said, as though it was a new concept. “Of course.”

Marnie and I walked out into the cold air. Nothing had been decided. Nothing had changed.

Marnie shivered and pushed her hands into the pockets of her jacket. Her hair almost glittered in the sunlight. “It’s true,” she said. “I *do* have things to do. Tell you what, I’ll come round your place tonight.”

I nodded numbly. “What time?”

“Say... eight.”

I nodded again.

“Ciao.”

“Ciao.”

She walked away from me. Above her winter boots and red socks were the bare backs of her knees. I wanted to kiss them and taste her skin. In my newly youthful body, the thought brought the odd and unaccustomed stirrings of an erection. It grew and then faded as she diminished in the slow drift of movement, as she became another figure, an artist's brushstroke to give these buildings a sense of scale.

Maybe I should have started earlier back. Perhaps that was part of the problem. Started back at the time when everything was fresh and new and right. But to do that, I would have had to go back to some misty and mythical place where Marnie wasn't Marnie and I wasn't me.

It was simply more complicated than that.

This was Marnie's second year at University. I'd seen her in the first year, of course; she was too pretty and... different not to be noticed. I think we might even have been to a couple of the same parties, not the student sort, but the ones around the chintzy academic fringes of the university where people dress up and pretend to stay sober, and start off talking about the Booker Prize and end up bitching about who's screwing whom. But Marnie didn't invite approaches, at least not from *me* she didn't.

She was twenty-four, a good three years older than the other undergrads. A *mature student*: how she hated that phrase. I suppose she was lonely in the way that older students always are, having to act as a shoulder to cry on, having to ignore or laugh along with the stupidities of her younger friends. She'd spent those extra years drifting in Europe, working as a nanny in Cannes, staying in some kibbutz, doing the sort of things that most people only talk about doing. I was seven years older, but I'd never really left school. She made me feel young, and she made me wonder just where and why and with whom she'd been doing all these things.

I only met her properly, face to face, when she took the computer graphics option in her second year. She didn't belong in the class. She was always sitting a little apart when I came in and the others looked up from their chatter. Marnie stood out in most situations. She just didn't belong. It was everything about her.

By the end of the second week, it was obvious that Marnie and

computers weren't going to get on. There wasn't much to learn—the whole purpose of the course was, after all, to allow the students to put computers down on their CVs when they applied for those cherished jobs in design offices and advertising agencies—but even when she hit the right keys, things would go wrong. And after I'd cleared the screen of gibberish, and she'd punched the keys or prodded the light pen or rolled the mouse again, with a simple pessimism that was quite different from the manner of people who are genuinely computer-phobic, something *else* would go wrong instead. I'd never known anything like it. She nearly brought down the whole mainframe in the third week, something that was theoretically impossible from our access port and doubtless caused Ritchie and his colleagues no end of fascination.

I didn't mind at all. It gave me a legitimate excuse to spend most of the tutorials sitting next to Marnie, to lean close to her as we pondered the latest catastrophe, and to breathe her scent. I kept my eyes on the screen, but that was because I could see her reflection so clearly in the glass.

She gave me no particular signals. Of course, someone as lovely as Marnie gives signals to every man she passes, but that is merely God's unthinking blessing and curse. She dressed differently from the other students, usually in skirts and dresses rather than jeans. She had a striped blue-and-white cotton jacket that she wore when the weather was still mild early in the term that I fell in love with for some reason. She wore her hair long or in a bun. She smelt of acacia and cigarettes and Marnie. There was a slowness about the way she moved, a kind of resignation. She understood how she looked, but, unlike most beautiful women, she had a kind of confidence, but absolutely no pride.

I was attracted. I wanted to walk along sunset beaches with her. I wanted to talk through the night. I wanted to go to bed with her, and stay there a long, long time. I wanted my fill of Marnie, and I wasn't sure how much that could possibly be. The whole thing quickly got out of hand. I wanted her too badly to break the silence and risk rejection. And by the fifth week of term, I was being brusque and ignoring her in class and then replaying every word and look endlessly, even in my sleep. I was even beginning to wonder if it really *was* Marnie, or whether I was simply going a little mad.

Then I saw her one afternoon. I was killing time, wandering in the local botanical gardens, because the Chancellor's department had cocked-up the room allocation for my tutorial. The big tropical house was a common enough place for students to work, and it came as a bigger surprise than it should have to find her there, sitting with an easel beside the goldfish

pool, filling in blocks of colour on a squared-off grid.

I said hello and she said hi. She was wearing a loose tee shirt, and I could see the curves of her shoulders and neck far more clearly than my fantasies had permitted. She seemed quite cheerful and relaxed. Marnie was, as I soon discovered, very partial to warmth, and very averse to the cold. A real hothouse flower. I sat down on the stone rim of the pond amid the bananas and rotting oranges and orchids, and we chatted. When I stood up for us to go down to the tea room by the pagoda, the backs of my trousers were soaking wet. We laughed about that, the first time we'd ever laughed together. When she pulled on her blue-and-white cotton jacket, her bare, downy arm brushed against my chest, and the feeling hit me like a huge, taut drum.

That was how it began. Now, with an afternoon to get through without her and only those odd, unsatisfactory words in the cafeteria to cling to, Marnie seemed almost as distant from me as she had all those years ahead, before I'd returned.

I spent the time wandering. I walked down to the botanical gardens, feeling more comfortable now with the undirected flood of traffic that growled past. This was, after all, my life. I had lived it. The eighties were as idiosyncratic as any other decade, but, at root, nothing was really that different from the true present. It was just a question of emphasis and style. Women pushed prams. Tramps mumbled. All the young people seemed to be plugged into those clumsy music players... Walkmans. They stared straight through you. Visitors from another planet. It reminded me of that Bradbury novel, all the people with shells in their ears. A helicopter chattered low and loud over the rooftops. No one looked up. And some of the new buildings looked as though they belonged on a moonbase. The future was already *here*. Of course, there were no silver air-cars or monorails, but, by now, people had realized that there never would be. Things would carry on pretty much as they had always done, and even the tantalizing fear of a black and glassy wasteland, the last of those great mid-century fantasies, was fading. These people pushing past and looking through me as they went about their busy, empty lives *knew* that nothing would ever really change. The holes in the sky would grow larger, and so would their flatter, squarer, sharper, deeper, thinner TV screens. And when the news slipped in between the commercials, the faces that peered out at them from those TV screens would still be ancient and hollow-eyed with starvation. The future was a fact that had arrived and had already been forgotten. It meant as much and as little to them as it would have done to their ancestors, dragging a plough or sheltering in a cave. They

knew that what lay ahead was the same as now, only more so.

There were no students in the tropical house today. I drank my coffee in the tea room down by the bandstand alone.

Still not feeling up to risking myself and the Porsche, I took a bus into the centre of town. I still had some change in my pockets, but it was running down. I knew I had a card in my wallet, next to the last five pound note, that would get me money from one of the many cash machines. But, for all my research and revision, I had no idea what my PIN number was.

I made the mistake of sitting on the top deck of the bus, and the ragged movements and the unaccustomed cigarette fumes left me feeling a little sick by the time it finally jerked to a halt outside C&As.

The shops were a revelation. I would have loved to have taken some of this stuff back to the present with me. Condoms (and who could ever forget AIDS? Well, I had, for one). Organic vegetables. Newspapers with *real news* in them. Compact discs. Posters like wallpaper with the name of the artist printed at the bottom in huge type. Mrs. Thatcher mugs! I guess I just gawked. The store detectives watched me carefully as I picked up this and prodded that. It was just like a museum. They were the museum keepers, and didn't even know it!

The evening rush hour caught me unawares. Everybody was grim, moving all at once. I had to queue in the yellow streetlight to get a place on the bus, and then had to stand most of the way to my stop. It was cold as I walked the last half mile, and I was pondering whether I should give my central heating a call—before I remembered. The house was warm anyway, the timer set thoughtfully to come on in the evening.

I took a bath, feeling a little guilty about how much I'd unthinkingly enjoyed my Marnie-less tour of the local sights. But, by seven, I was waiting, anxiously clean and freshly clothed, not so much watching the TV as playing with the remote control.

Slices of the Channel Four News. Some quiz programme. An old Doris Day film. Top of the Pops. Top of the Pops was the most diverting (did Michael Jackson ever look *that* young?) but none of them held my attention for long. Soon, Marnie would be here. I planned on going out for a meal, maybe that Indian place just along the road, something ordinary and nostalgic, a place where we could sit in peaceful, candlelit anonymity and talk longingly. And then we'd walk back, hugging each other close against the cold, our frosty breath entwined in the streetlight, back to my house, to my bed.

Eight o'clock came and went. Marnie was always late, of course. I fixed

myself a shot of Famous Grouse at half past, and then another at five to nine. All the usual questions and accusations were starting a headache hammer inside my head. I wandered around the house, looking at the wallpaper I'd chosen, the furniture and the things I hadn't seen in thirty years. Now, if I'd only kept that big plastic Foster's Lager ashtray that Marnie had smuggled out of the local wine bar under her coat and used to roll her joints. Somewhere along the years, it had departed from my life; exactly the sort of bric-a-brac that grew in value because no one thought anything of it at the time. There were a distressingly large number of things like that around the house. I'd been sitting on a gold mine, and I'd never realized it. And where the goddamned hell *was* she anyway?

Where was Marnie? At any moment since we'd become lovers, and even for some time before, that question was always somewhere in my thoughts. Another half hour, another whisky. I stood at the window and watched the empty pavement. I sat down and tried the TV again. I lay on the bed. I got up. I put the record player on. Old music for these old times. But the question followed me about, tapping at my shoulder, clutching at my elbow, whispering in my ear. What is she *doing*? She was with someone *else*, that was what. She'd never been faithful, not truly, not *faithful*, that was what.

I'd seen her walking the campus with another man the morning after the very first night we'd made love. I was still glowing. I sidled behind a tree. I watched them cross the wide and milling spaces. At the steps in front of the library she put her arms around him and laughed and gave him a quick kiss. She said he was just a student, when I quizzed her in the corridor as she came out from pottery, clay on her apron and hands and arms like the evidence of a crime, just someone she liked who had said something funny. Just another student. Snob that I was, that hurt more than anything. He was three years younger than her, for crissake! And when I followed him into the cafeteria for lunch, I saw that he had greasy hair and a fair sprinkling of zits.

Ten o'clock. She wasn't coming. No one, *absolutely no one*, let me down like this! And this wasn't the *first* time, either, oh no, she let me down all the time! No more whisky, I decided, having suddenly drunk myself up to some sort of calm plateau. Tonight might be a dead loss but there would be plenty of other times. Yes, plenty.

I pulled on a coat and went for a walk. I hadn't walked so much in one day for a long time. It was quiet now, the cars passed by in separate flashes of light. The big petrol station by the traffic lights glowed like a Spielberg spaceship. I headed down past the hospital towards Marnie's

place. It was pure masochism, I knew I wouldn't find her there.

Architecturally, the big old houses on Westborne Road were similar to those of the sales directors and wine importers who lived around me, but here, a little further out of town, there were dirty net curtains at the windows and bedsit rows of bell buttons beside the doors.

Hers was the top window, set in a gable, with a wind-chime owl hanging from the casement in perpetual silence. I crunched up the worn tarmac drive, where a Morris Minor was parked beside a wheelless Triumph Herald up on bricks, and tried the buzzer anyway. A typed strip beside it had the name of the previous occupant, one R. Singh. Marnie never got around to changing anything. There was no reply. The shape of the stairs in the low-wattage light of the hall loomed through the coloured door-glass. I could smell cat's piss. A record player boomed faintly, deep inside. A man was laughing.

I stopped at the Ivy Bush on the way back, just in time for another drink. There was a traditional jazz band playing in the back room, but I stayed out of the noise in the flock wallpaper lounge. The publican recognized me and said hello. I nodded back, but his face was one that I had completely forgotten. Although I didn't feel particularly drunk, I had to fight back a strong urge to sit down on the spare chair facing those two elderly ladies and tell them that I'd come all the way from the future just for love. But common sense prevailed. Apart from anything else, they were probably quite used to those sort of conversations in this particular pub.

I got back to the house at about midnight, drank some more whisky, debating for a while the merits of taking it straight from the bottle, but deciding to keep with etiquette and use a tumbler, pulled off a representative assortment of clothes and flopped on the bed. The room spun a little, but not as much as I'd hoped. This young body could sure hold its drink.

Then the doorbell rang.

"You've got one sock off," Marnie said as she swaggered in. "You mean I've got one sock on."

She threw her coat over the stair rail. It slid to the floor. She'd been drinking too. She had a blue dress on underneath, one that showed her figure.

"What happened?" I asked, following her into the lounge. She flopped down on the sofa, kicked off her shoes, put her feet up. "I tried to ring." She gazed at her toes. "Sure. What time?" "You don't believe me."

We were sparring, trying to find out who was more pissed. The things one does for love.

“I’d like a drink,” she said. “You’ve had enough.”

“Look, Daniel,” she said, switching off the booze in her brain just as she’d switched it on. “I’m sorry.”

I poured us each a glass. She ignored it for a moment then took it and drank it with both hands.

“What time did you ring?”

“Is this a quiz? Do I get a prize?” She smiled. “Men look funny in shirts and underpants... and one sock. Put something on, Dan—or take something off.”

“I’ve been waiting for you all night. What happened?”

“I rang you at ten. You weren’t in then, were you? I tried earlier, but the box was vandalized and it stank. I’m truly sorry. It was my fault.”

I sat down on the sofa by her feet. “Who were you with?”

So she began to tell me about the Visconti film she’d been to see at the arts centre that turned out to be a two part epic and how someone had given her a lift to the bus stop but then their car had broken down. I was angry-drunk, sure that reason and right were on my side, but there was an element of bitter comedy to this. I knew the story already. It was like watching an old series on TV and discovering that you’re familiar with every twist and turn, that your brain had retained those meaningless facts for so many years. Why, I wondered, gazing at the lovely and abstract curves of Marnie’s thighs where the dress had ridden up, hadn’t I realized that this would be tonight? Her story stumbled on, an absurd, convoluted epic involving a pub and a wine bar and meeting up with a few more friends and the simple fact that she’d forgotten.

“Nothing’s ever your fault,” I said. “Nothing ever *was*.”

Her eyes widened a little. “You almost sound like you mean that.”

I wondered if I did. I finished my whisky and put it down. I waited for the room to settle. The dress had gone up and she’d made no effort to cover herself. Playing the whore, getting at me that way. It made me angry all over again to realize just how easily it worked.

I took hold of her feet and massaged them, greedy for the feel of her flesh under the nylon.

“Do you forgive?” she asked, not wanting to be forgiven.

“Yes,” I said, not meaning it, simply watching her body. Nothing had changed. We were back in the same old ways. The same tracks. The same dead end sidings. The past and the present had joined and

now her skirt

now her skirt

rode higher and my hands touched the tension in her calves and thighs

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and up towards what was promised underneath, widening and sweeten-

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We showered separately afterwards to wash away some of the drink, and our guilt at using each other so easily. Nothing had changed. Sex with someone you can hardly talk to afterwards has to be a bad idea. So this was what I'd come all this way for. My Marnie. My love. She pulled back the shower curtains and stepped through the moist heat. There were droplets on her shoulders and face. Nothing had changed. Her hair was dark and smooth and wet, like a swimmer's.

We lay in the same bed through the grey night. Marnie breathed soft and heavy beside me. Sometimes, I remembered, I could talk to her when she was like this, find all the right words. But even that was gone. Nothing had changed, the only difference was that everything I did now reeked of falsity. I was a voyeur, staring out at my own life through keyhole eyes.

And I could press *return* at any time, clear the screen to end this absurd role-playing game. The thought was a bitter comfort, with Marnie so real and so distant beside me, and yet somehow it drew me into sleep, through the walls and into the sky and deep inside Marnie's eyes, where there was only the sparky darkness of electricity, circuitry, and machine power.

I awoke. The greyness was growing stronger with the winter dawn. My Marnie. The perfect, anonymous curves of wrist and back and cheekbone. The composure of sleep. I touched her skin gently, lovingly, and it rippled and broke. She rolled over and muttered something and stumbled out of bed to go to the loo.

The clock said seven thirty. I wanted to make love to her again, not

really for the sex, but just to convince myself that she was real. But when she came back she began to collect her scattered clothes.

“God, I hate wearing yesterday’s knickers.”

“You should bring some of your stuff around here,” I said, crossing my hands behind my head, “We could even try living together,” pleased with myself at how easily I’d managed to slip that one through.

She gave me a be-serious look and pulled her slip on over her head. “Let’s have breakfast. I could fix something.”

“Something nice... ?”

“Goes without saying.” She picked up her dress and gave it a shake. “I’m the perfect housewife.”

Irritatingly fully dressed, she wafted out of the bedroom. I sat up and put my feet on the carpeted floor. I supposed the morning had to begin some time.

We faced each other across toast and boiled eggs at the breakfast table.

“What about living together?” I asked her again.

She looked wonderfully pretty with no make-up and her hair a mess. I wondered why women had never grasped the fact that men actually *preferred* them this way, without the paint and plastic.

She thwacked the top off her egg. “What about it?”

“Come on, Marnie.” I tackled my own egg, tapping it gently around the sides. “I thought you were always saying you wanted to try anything new.”

“Living together isn’t new, Dan. We’d row too much. Look at us now. It’s great when it’s great, but it’s like being on a roller coaster. And that wouldn’t last for long.”

“That’s exactly my point,” I said, keeping my voice smoothly reasonable and staring back at the watery ruin inside my egg. Marnie was a useless cook. “Things would get better.”

“Dan, they would just get the same. You *know* that.”

It was hard to stay in love with her for long when she was like this. Mulishly refusing to listen. Her sweet disorder was just an irritant. She was wearing that blue dress of the night before, that smelt of cigarettes and the places she’d been to and the people she’d been with. There was even a red wine stain just above her left breast. It was too easy to imagine some oaf mopping it for her.

“And exactly who were you with last night?”

“We’ve been through all that.” She pushed away her plate and went in search of cigarettes. I followed her as she dug into her handbag and under cushions.

“You shouldn’t smoke anyway,” I said. “Look at you, you’re a bloody addict.”

“One more word,” she said, “and I’m leaving. I don’t *need* this first thing in the morning. I mean, come on, do *you*?”

But she didn’t find her cigarettes, and I did say several more words. This was an easy row by our standards, kid’s stuff. Marnie told me to go to hell and a few more places besides, and she used the F-word, which I never liked, especially from a woman. Then she grabbed up her coat and handbag and stormed out, banging the front door so hard that it bounced open again, letting in the cold of the morning. I had to go down the hall and shut it myself.

I poured out some more coffee in the kitchen, ignoring the yellow-eyed stare of the eggs. Until this moment, my body had somehow disregarded its shortage of sleep and excess of alcohol, but something had jogged its memory and now it was making up for lost time. I took the cup through to the lounge and dropped down into a chair, leaving the curtains closed. Marnie’s cigarettes peeked out from underneath the dishevelled sofa. I stared at them. What *was* it about being in love with her? I was acting like a robot, as though I had no free will.

Something would have to change. The thought kept recurring over the next two days as Marnie and I avoided each other, just as we had done before, just as we always did, playing the game of pride, pretending that an acknowledgement of the fact that we needed each other would be a sign of weakness. Something would have to change. Everything was just the same. A petite Taiwanese student had a nosebleed in one of my classes. I got a letter from my parents telling me that old Uncle Derek was in a bad way from a stroke. I broke one of my heavy Waterford whisky glasses and cut my finger when I was washing up. The passage of these days, it seemed, had been pegged out by accidents and misfortunes.

But life had its compensations. I spent a lovely lecture-free Friday morning taking the Porsche up and down the close and along the local roads, just to get the feel of it again. As with everything else, it was really just a matter of letting my subconscious take over. The Porsche obeyed my commands promptly and politely, its great engine purring like an eager-to-please cat. Inside there was still that beautiful smell you got from cars in those days. The whole feel of it was nice, precise. For the first time

since I'd returned, I felt as though I was really in command. Around lunchtime, I went for a longer drive, risking the traffic and finding that, with the Porsche, I had nothing to fear. We all used to take driving for granted, but in the right car it could be a real pleasure: the Porsche was the right car.

My route took me through the fringes of a highrise slum, the Porsche as strange as a spaceship in this land of the dog turd and the abandoned mattress. I turned gratefully back towards the bright and busy hive of the university, along Westborne Road, under the tree shadows, past the big old houses. And there, quite by chance, was Marnie, walking and talking between two men.

I slowed the Porsche to a smooth walking pace and buttoned the window down.

"Fancy a lift, Marnie?"

"Okay," she said, without an ounce of hesitation. I unclicked the door and she slipped elegantly into the bucket seat. I exchanged a look with the two scruff postgrads she'd been walking with. Sorry, lads.

We zoomed off.

"I've just been driving around this morning," I said. "I'd forgotten how good the Porsche was."

She laughed. "How can you forget a thing like this? It takes half your salary."

"You like it?"

"Of course I do. It's just a car, but it's a nice car. Why do you have to keep asking people these things? It's like you don't believe them yourself."

I shook my head, shrugged. I touched the brake and the car rooted itself to the line of a junction.

"Last night, whenever it was," she said. "I don't blame you for being angry when I was late. It's just that everything gets so *big* with you and me. When you're sweet, Dan, everything's fine, but we always seem to be looking for ways to hurt each other."

"I've been trying to think what to say," I said. "Really, Marnie... I'm sorry, too." Sincerity was always easier when you were driving.

I flashed my pass at the security guard at the east gate. I parked in my usual place by the arts faculty.

She slammed the passenger door.

“Careful,” I said.

“Careful’s my middle name.”

“Come round tonight,” I said to her across the Porsche’s roof. “It doesn’t matter what time. And we’ll sleep together and when we wake up on Saturday, whenever, we’ll go somewhere in this car. A day out, you and me.”

She smiled, her perfect face reflected in the perfect, glossy black. “That sounds nice.”

Deeply in love, I watched her walk away. She gave me a backwards wave over her shoulder. My Marnie, my one and only.

Because I hadn’t stipulated early, the doorbell rang just after six. Marnie stood framed in the light from the hall against the winter black, wearing a tartan shawl and a waxed cotton jacket, carrying her overnight bag.

“Let me help you with that,” I said, ever the kindly host.

I dumped her bag by the telephone in the hall and swung the door shut with my foot. Helping her off with her jacket, my hands strayed from her shoulders, spoilt for choice between the curves of her breasts and her lovely behind. She turned and pushed herself against me. Our mouths locked, greedily exchanging breath and saliva. We were half undressed by the time we managed to get up the stairs. Marnie bounced onto the bed, sitting up to undo the remaining buttons of her blouse.

“No,” I said, struggling to take off my watch and socks at the same time. “I’ll do that. I’ll do everything.”

We went for a meal later at the nearby Indian restaurant. It was a regular place of ours. The waiters gave us the best table, away from the toilets and the door to the street. I’d managed to get some cash by writing a cheque at the bank, but my recollection of prices was still vague, and even though Marnie always insisted on paying her share, I wasn’t sure whether I’d have enough for the meal and to see us through the weekend. When we sat down, I asked Marnie if they’d accept Visa.

“We always pay that way here,” she said, pulling her chair in. “You’re very forgetful lately.”

“You’re too much of a distraction.”

“Let’s see now.” She reached across the pink tablecloth and took my hand. She was achingly beautiful in the candlelight. “You tell me who the Chancellor of the Exchequer is.”

I went cold. I didn't have the faintest idea. Antony Barber? Too early. Dennis Healey? No, Labor. Then who?

Her golden-lit eyes saw through me for a moment.

I felt as though I wasn't there.

"Time's up," she said, letting go of my hand.

The waiter came over with the menus. In the brief distraction, I remembered. But it was too late to say.

"I'm sorry," I said, studying the long lists of kormas and tandoori dishes to avoid meeting her eyes. "I've been feeling a bit odd lately. You've obviously noticed. Maybe I should see a doctor." I tried a laugh. "Or a psychiatrist."

It was the only fragile moment in an otherwise perfect evening. We got merry on house red. I asked her about her name, just as I'd done all those years before, and she admitted that, yes, her mother really *had* got it from that Hitchcock movie. Not even a particularly *good* Hitchcock movie, she added, her eyes dropping towards the candlewax and poppadum crumbs. I took her hand and kissed her palm and held it tenderly against my cheek.

Underneath all the looks and all the laughter and all the friends she had, Marnie was vulnerable. There was no doubt about it. Sitting talking or not talking, simply gazing at her, I could also feel my own barriers slipping down. We were so different, so alike: disappointed with a world that had given us many of the things we didn't want and held out on the few we really desired. Between the two of us there was *something*. Like looking in a mirror, it was both a separation and a sharing, a glassy edge between us on which we tried to balance our love. In later years, of course, I romanticized her, idealized her, but now, being with her again, sharing the thoughts and looks and words and silences, of that best kind that you can never recall afterwards, I lost any remaining doubts about our love being ordinary, or even a passing obsession. I *loved her*. This was, for once in my life, totally and completely real.

We walked home, hugging each other close against the cold, our frosty breath entwined in the streetlight.

The perfect evening was followed by a perfect night. Everything we did we did slowly, heavily blurred with love. We kissed each other through the edges of sleep. Once, deep in the night, she began to shiver, although it wasn't from the cold. I held her tight until she was still, as I had done before.

"Help me, Dan," she whispered from inside. "Love me."

The dream flowed into the dreamy morning. Bringing coffee to our bed, I could hardly believe that it was this simple and natural to be in love. With the curtains open so we could see the trees and the sky, we sat close under the comforter and debated over a map where we might go. We settled on wherever the roads took us.

I rolled the Porsche proudly out of the garage through a romantic mist of exhaust. My lovely car; it seemed right that it should share our lovely day. I was grinning stupidly, a kid at Christmas. I felt like laughing at the thought of how hard I'd tried to find the *words* when I'd first returned to Marnie, when all that mattered really was being like this. Together.

I even trusted her to drive for a while, once we were safely out on the country roads. She grated the gears a couple of times, but I managed to keep quiet: no damage was done, and she understood the need to be delicately careful. We swapped back over. It was a wonderful feeling to be driving in this car, with a beautiful woman beside me and nothing but ourselves to fill the day, and the bare trees reaching over the roads, their clawed reflections sweeping the wide hood. We stopped at a country pub and sat in old leather chairs beneath the beams and in the firelight, sipping salty, hoppy beer. They were already playing Christmas tunes on the jukebox, and we talked about where we would go together then. Somewhere with mountains and snow.

Marnie peeled the print off a beer mat and sketched a picture of me with a biro. When she handed it over, I saw that it was as good as it had always been, a little too accurate for me to appreciate, maybe; a few quick and easy strokes that said things that those old, cold photographs never had. The only difference now was that the card of the mat was softly white again, instead of the yellowed memento I was more used to. Marnie's work was always at its best when she wasn't concentrating or trying. She wasn't really an artist. She had talent, but she was too busy coping with life to turn it into much. She would never have become any kind of artist or designer.

On our way out through the deserted benches of the pub garden, Marnie sat down on the kiddies' wooden swing, not caring about the lichen and moss. She tilted her legs and I pushed her back and forth. The publican came out to bring a barrel up from the cellar. I expected him to tell us to get the hell off, but he just looked and smiled oddly at us, like a man who realises he's lost something.

As we drove on, Marnie told me about a day when she was a child, when it was summer and her father was still alive. He'd pushed her on a creaky swing into the hot sky. He had a tweed jacket that smelt of pipe tobacco

and that itched when he hugged her. There were shimmering trees and a lake and a big house of white stone.

“I wish I could find out where that place was,” she said. “Just in the past, I guess.”

I parked the Porsche under the trees in a country lane. A quiet place. A pretty, nowhere place. The sky was thickly grey. Everything was shadowed and soft, like a room with the curtains drawn. We walked on between the dark hedgerows.

A sign pointed across the fields towards a landmark hill. We followed the track, keeping to the grassy sides to avoid the worst of the mud. A flock of swans flew silently over. Their whiteness seemed to make them ghostly creatures from another world.

Standing at the grassy top of the hill, the whole of a county was spread around us. The grey of the city to the north. Villages and towns. Trees and fields dark with winter. A toy van travelling down a toy road. A big reservoir: tarnished silver, then suddenly bright in the ripples from a breeze that soon touched our faces with cold.

“We haven’t *done* anything today,” I said.

“That’s what’s been so good.” Marnie hugged me. I could feel the soft pressure of her breasts.

“I’d like to have another day like this, please.”

“I’d like to have another day like this, please.”

I couldn’t bring myself to reply. She let go. “What is it, Dan?” I shrugged. “Just... talking about the future.” “You should know the future never comes.”

What was I supposed to do? Nothing had changed. This day. This hill. These words. Marnie. Me.

“What shall we do tonight?” I asked.

“What shall we do tonight?” I asked.

“I’ll have to go back to my flat.”

“I’ll have to go back to my flat.”

I nodded, trying very hard to picture her in that cold and empty room, with the half-finished paintings, the drooping rubber plant in the corner, the owl wind-chime silent at the window.

“I promised to see some people,” she said. “A sort of party. Come along with me. It’ll be fun.”

“It doesn’t matter what I say, does it?”

“Don’t be like that. Please.”

We walked back to the Porsche in our own puzzled and separate silences. It was waiting under the trees, looking like something out of a calendar or a magazine. Marnie climbed inside and lit a cigarette, exhaling a cloud against the dashboard and windscreen.

“Couldn’t you have done that when you were outside?” I said thickly.

She took another drag. “It’s too cold out there, Dan. It’ll go when we get moving...” She gave me a pitying look. Poor Daniel, the look said, to be bothered by such an absurd little thing. In truth, I wasn’t bothered, as I had been before. But it was too late to change things.

Marnie shivered. “Can’t we just get going? I’m cold. I’ve been cold all day.”

Cold all day.

Cold all day.

I gripped the steering wheel hard. “I thought we’d been happy. I thought today was special... So special you won’t even bloody well stay with me tonight!”

“It *has* been special,” she said. She opened the ashtray on the dash between us and maneuvered her cigarette towards it. But the ash fell on the black carpet beside the gearbox. She gave it a careless brush, as though that was enough. “I’ve just been a bit... chilly. You know how I am.”

The inside of the car was thick with smoke. I clicked the ignition key on a turn and pressed the master button that brought both of the windows down. “Why the hell do you have to smoke in here?” I said over the gentle buzz of the window motors. “Especially when we’re trying to talk?”

She laughed, or attempted to. I think she was already starting to cry. “You call this *talking*? All that bothers you is me smoking in this precious bloody car of yours. Marnie messing up your pretty images of the way everything *should* be. Marnie smoking. Marnie drinking. Marnie actually sometimes wanting to be with people *other than you*. When all *you* want is some woman to sit by you in this bloody, *bloody* car! It’s that simple, isn’t it?”

I gripped the steering wheel. I said nothing. There was no point.

“Why don’t you just fuck off,” she said childishly, childishly stubbing the cigarette out on my carpet, getting out of the Porsche, childishly

slamming the door.

I got out on my side. She was standing there beneath the big oak tree, with the placid winter countryside all around us, as though none of this was happening.

“If you could see yourself,” I said. “How stupid this is.” “Of *course* it’s stupid! We’re having a *stupid argument*. Or perhaps you hadn’t noticed?”

“Why?” I asked reasonably.

“Everything has to be so *personal* with you,” she said, breathing in and out in shudders, her face puffed with ugly tears. “That bloody car of yours! This was a lovely day until you ruined it.”

“I want you to respect me... respect my property.”

“Your *property!*” Now she was yelling. The sound was unnatural, unwomanly.

I’d never seen her this angry before.

I’d never seen her this angry before.

“Just listen...”

I stepped towards her. She pushed me away and stumbled over to the car.

“You deserve this—” she was shouting through the thickness of her tears. “—You really do. You bastard! Your property! You do deserve this. I love you, you bastard. I’m not. Your property. *Fuck you*. I hope you never—”

I watched her fumble open the driver’s door. She started the Porsche with the accelerator floored and the gears in reverse. The engine howled, and the car gave a juddering leap backwards into a tree. The bumper crunched, shivering leaves and scraps of bark through swirls of exhaust. Marnie knocked the wiper stalk as she screeched into first. The blades flicked to and fro. Then she pulled away, the fat tyres kicking up a shower of mud and leafmold; a rich, incongruous scent amid the drifting reek of the petrol.

The engine roar faded into silence. I looked at my watch; almost four o’clock. I began to walk back along the road towards the nearest village. I knew the way: right at the crossroads and straight ahead after that. I was even able to save myself a mile’s pointless detour down a badly signed road that petered out to a farm track, but it was still deep twilight, and my shoes were pinching badly by the time I reached the village green and used the phonebox to call for a cab. I waited shivering outside. There were trees

and chimneys and a church spire in silhouette against a grainy sky, warmly lit leaded windows in the houses, two ducks circling in the dim pond. The whole scene was heavy with nostalgia for times much earlier than these, the wholesome wood-scented, apple-scented, sunset-coloured days that had never been.

The cab came quickly. Questing headlights swung towards me across the crumbling churchyard wall. It was a Japanese car, I think, not the sort of car that had a real name that anyone remembers. A functional box on wheels. I asked the driver to take me to the nearest town; I didn't bother to explain. I knew that he would perform his role well enough in silence, just as he had done before.

The shops were shut, and the main car park around the big war memorial where he dropped me off was almost empty. No use offering Visa. I paid the fare without a tip. I was left with exactly forty-nine pence in my pockets. A cold wind was starting. A few cans rattled and chimed across the streetlit tarmac.

The police station was on a side road at the back of Woolworth's. An old man backing out through the doors with his dog gave me a weary, sharing smile. I told the duty constable at the counter that an acquaintance had driven my car away without permission. I didn't think they were insured. I told him the car was a Porsche. Unimpressed, he nodded towards the empty plastic benches by the doors and told me to wait.

I sat down. Like the few other police stations I've been inside, this one was absurdly quiet, as though it had been waiting for greying, paint-peeling years for something to happen. Something to make up for all the drunks, and all the people like me. I studied the curling posters on the notice board opposite. Oddly, I couldn't remember any of them. I wondered vaguely, irrationally, if that was somehow a sign that things would end up differently.

Two sergeants came out from a room at the back. They flipped up the side of the counter. Before they spoke, I knew from their faces that it had happened. I wondered if this was the time to end it, but part of me wanted to see it again. To be certain.

They drove me to the reservoir. There was a noisy crane there already, and floodlights probing thick yellow shafts into the water. Men in uniforms peered down from the roadside. People were gathering around the fringes of the darkness to watch. One of the sergeants leaned over to the back seat before we stepped out of the car and asked me if I thought it was an accident; just the sort of casual question they try on you before

you've had time to put your guard up.

"I used to think so," I said, not caring what they made of it. "But now I don't know. I'm not sure."

The Porsche looked like a big, black crab as it broke the surface. It rose into the harsh light, water sluicing out of it in glittering curves. People *oohed* and *aahed*. Chains tensed and screamed with the car's weight. The air filled with the smell of green mud, like a bad beach at low tide. The crane paused for a moment, a big insect hesitating with its prey, then swung the car down onto the road. The suspension broke with twig-like snaps. The car was still wet and heavy, dark pools sliding across the verge and down the bank, running eagerly back into the reservoir. Sleepwalking figures broke the door open, and there was a thick rush of mud before they lifted Marnie out. No one hurried. I didn't envy the police their job.

They asked me if it was her. Just confirmation, for the record. I walked through to the front, where an ambulance stood with its lights uselessly circling and its doors uselessly open. A man in a wetsuit pushed past me, wiping something from his hands. They'd just left her on the road. No point in messing the blankets. Her head was turned away, an abstract curve of neck and cheekbone. Her skin was glossy white, and her hair was dark and smooth and wet. Like a swimmer's. I nodded, but this wasn't *my* Marnie, my one and only, the woman I loved.

I stepped back, away from the flashlights and the floodlights and the spinning blue lights and the people. The time had come, there was no point in going any further. Somewhere from the machine darkness, I would have to summon the will to try again. Try again. Press Return. I let the images and sensations fade, the sounds, the sights, the smells.

There *will* be another time, Marnie. A better time than this, believe me.

I promise.

I *promise*.