

Snow

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Billy didn't actually stop the car - it just slithered to a rather off-centre halt in the last few inches of the small car park, fortunately without running into the grey stone wall which guarded the first cottage in the row. He sat for a moment, blessing the two guardian angels which together had decreed that (a) he and his passenger might arrive unharmed, and (b) food was not going to be a problem during their stay.

One of the guardian angels - arguably the one which looked out over motorists in dire trouble - had kept the level and amount of snowfall within both Billy's driving skills and that which the car could itself handle. The other guardian angel had made them call in at Tesco's on the way out, and stock up with food.

Only when Billy forced his hands to unclench from the steering wheel did he realise that he had sat immobile for several minutes as the tension drained from him. He hadn't dared ask whether Joanna's lack of comment in the last hour and a half had been born from fear, or the desire not to distract him whilst he had been coaxing the car over the roads covered with deepening snow. He did not know why they had arrived intact, except to make the private admission that on several occasions it had been nothing more than chance which had saved them from leaving the road entirely. Already the windscreen was half an inch deep, the wipers failing to clear the snow, and he switched off the ignition.

Joanna looked at him in complete awe. "That," she said, entirely without a trace of condescension in her voice, "was the most incredible piece of driving I've ever seen."

Able at last to smile, and fearful of giving away the secret that luck had played the greater part, Billy summoned a grin. "I'd hate to do it again to prove it," he replied.

"No, seriously, I don't know anyone else who could have done that."

"I don't know anyone else crazy enough to have tried. We should have turned back at Chesterfield, like I said. I can't think what made me not turn back. We might be stuck here for days and who knows who else will turn up."

Joanna laughed. "Billy," she said, "no-one else will come. Look at it, I mean, just *look* at it."

The short cobbled drive between the car park and the end of the run of cottages was eighteen inches deep in snow; clear, unbroken snow, already ridged where the wind whipped between the double row of unoccupied cottages. Flurries plumed around the walls and all the time came the heavy snowflakes, in the glow of the headlights not white, but looking dark, hungry, powerful. He turned and looked out through the rear window, now also opaque with fallen snow.



“Come on. If we sit here we’ll never get the bags over. Have you got the key?”

Joanna nodded, pulled on a coat, and grabbing a bulky weekend bag, opened the passenger door and winced as the winter wind appeared to slice straight through her heavy coat. Fishing out the cottage keys from her pocket, she strode purposefully through the snowdrifts to the cottage and fitted the key in the lock.

Billy brought his own bag and one of the cardboard boxes of groceries. It was never possible to determine exactly how many of his old University friends would turn up for these occasional get-togethers. Despite promises to come, some would have changed orbit so much in the years since graduation that they would find more important things to do when it came to turning out; others would promise to come, but when the day arrived, just not bother to turn up at all.

Of course there was what he privately termed the reliable cadre, the Dependables, who like him regarded the friendships forged at University to be strong enough to withstand the shock of everyone scattering to the four winds once the graduation was completed. Certainly on this particular weekend he expected at least six fellows, including his passenger. So it seemed the best policy to fill the car boot with enough food to last eight people a couple of days. It was less trouble to do this than to have to go back to Bakewell on the second day and stock up with supplies; and if it happened that only three or four turned up, and if they went to the pub for at least one main meal, it would save restocking the commissariat altogether.

The cottage wore the usual overcoat of lack of occupation. Outside, the narrow slope between the two rows led down to a meandering stream which in the summer dried out almost completely, and the towering ridges either side of the side cut off the nest of buildings from the outside world with a cheerful ruthlessness. Without a sketch map to find the place, it just didn’t exist.¹

The small cottage was ostensibly dry, but smelt a little damp and lot un-lived-in. It belonged to some distant relatives of his, who rarely used it, and Billy and found it a convenient retreat when he wanted simple peace and quiet. His fellow students had found it amenable for revision, without distraction of pub or club. All it needed was a roaring fire, a boiling kettle, and the kind of company you preferred, even it was just your own. Billy came two or three times every year.

¹ *Author’s note : the cottage exists, exactly as described.*



They had to make two trips each, fighting the calf-high snow, but eventually the front door was shut against the elements. "I'll get a fire going," Billy said, his mind tuned to practicalities. "Would you sort out a hot drink? After that we can see what's what."

Billy had laid in a stock of logs on his previous visit and these were still unused, resting in a covered lean-to just outside the back door. This opened directly into the kitchen, and whilst Joanna busied herself with the kettle, he set a match to kindling and newspaper in the grate and, bringing in two armfuls of logs, stacked them aside the hearth. In a few minutes there was a cheerful flame going and by the time Joanna came in with a tray of coffee and biscuits, Billy was laying the first round of logs.

"Teeth in the coffee," Joanna explained.

Billy, not particularly a whisky drinker, was grateful for the spirit. It seemed entirely appropriate for the particular conditions. Outside in the courtyard between the two rows of cottages, the blizzard raged

imperiously, driving the snow into deep ridges and coating the windowsills. Once the temperature in the room started to rise, the glass in the windows ran clear. It didn't seem worth while closing the curtains, and anyway he liked the feeling of being inside from the snow storm.

He let the spirit sink deep into him, allowed himself to relax, and Joanna, nudging the fire with the poker and periodically feeding in fresh logs from the hearthside supply, let him sleep for an hour. He awoke to the sound of pots and pans clattering cheerfully in the kitchen, and stretched, wondering what time it was before deciding he didn't really care. He passed though the kitchen and up the creaking wooden stairs, and switched on the shower.

Billy let it run for several minutes, closing his mind to the thought of fifty pence pieces dropping through the greedy electricity meter, and allowed the tiny bathroom to fill with hot steam whilst he unpacked his case and packed his spare clothes away neatly into the old dark-wooded chest of drawers. He left the top two for Joanna, and taking his small bathroom bag and a towel, gave himself the luxury of a long hot shower.

There was a knock from outside. "Are you decent?" Joanna asked through he closed door, and he wrapped a towel around his waist before answering "Yes." The door opened and her hand appeared, carrying a fresh mug of coffee. "You can come in, it's all right," he said.

She looked at him through the dispersing steam, and narrowed her eyes at the trio of scars across his left shoulder. Seeing where her gaze was resting, he said, quickly, "A souvenir from service life." Joanna nodded slowly, and as he did not elaborate further, simply handed him the mug and left. He towelled himself dry and dressed quickly before the heat in the room disappeared, and returned downstairs to be met by a delightful smell of frying bacon and sausages.

"Stir," she said. "I'm going to have a shower whilst the room's still warm."

Billy shunted the bacon and sausages around the frying-pan and listened to the creak of the old floorboards over his head as Joanna used the shower, picturing her naked under the spraying water. This fantasy soon exhausted itself, and he added eggs, readying plates and cutlery when she came down, wearing a change of clothes and looking bright and cheerful.

"How many were you expecting?" she asked.

"At least another four, what you'd call reliable people. Tony, Keyta, Paul and George. Maybe Sonia and William; perhaps Iain." He paused for a moment. "Somehow they don't seem so keen to come. I suppose it's inevitable - most of them are all over the country now. Carl is in Germany, and Hin Peng went back to Hong Kong."

"It's an ill wind," she said, looking at the small stack of supermarket bags and then transferring her gaze outside. The snow was still industriously climbing the windowsills and the wood panels in between the panes of glass, but the room was now warm from the log fire in the next room, the window glass clear over the back yard and redundant outside lavatory. They carried their plates through into the living room and sat at the old wooden table. Neither of them seemed to want distraction from the business of eating, and it was only when the plates were empty that Joanna was moved to speak.

"We can survive for four days at least, and longer if we have to. But the milk won't last that long, even though the food will be ok in the fridge."

Billy laughed. "Just leave it outside," he replied.

Joanna stretched, her arms reaching high, her head thrown back. Billy looked carefully at her, wondering if her always practical approach to life was a front to cover something. He doubted it. Joanna rarely asked for help with anything.

He cleared the table and gently pushed her back to the more comfortable sofa when she made to stand up and help him. She gave a flash of irritation, but when she saw his face, she realised that he wasn't being patronising; just courteous. Once she heard him start the washing-up, she poured him another inch of whisky and left it by the fire to warm. She had to stop herself from going into the kitchen and doing the drying, but she knew that he preferred to work alone, and anyway, on rare occasions she gave in to being a little looked after.

They settled into the old, tired armchairs by the fire, each with his or her feet being gently toasted by the flames. Billy's earlier fatigue had gone, and left behind a cheerful tiredness, the sort he experienced after a long, successful and satisfying piece of work, when he had earned some relaxation time. Joanna lay like a stretched-out cat, eyes closed but ears pricked. The snow now lay two and a half feet thick outside the front door, and the wind, still audibly whistling around the cobbled courtyard, had given up trying to push it into ridges. It lay flat like a lake. Oddly enough, there was a single street lamp at the end of the courtyard, and its light threw down a skin of white on top of the snow, twinkling as each flake fell victim to a new layer falling from the black sky above the slate roofs.

"I think we'd better sleep down here," he said eventually. "The bedroom will be freezing, and if I clear the chairs away and put the table into the kitchen, there'll be room. I think we had five in here once, didn't we?"

"Okay," said Joanna simply. Billy could not fathom any indication of concern in her voice, which had been perfectly neutral, and decided against saying that if she preferred to be alone in the room, he'd go upstairs anyway. But she said nothing, and he shelved the words, taking the seat

cushions from the armchairs and laying them out for a makeshift bed. Joanna threw her sleeping bag over the sofa, and climbing out of jeans and sweater, zipped herself up to the chin in the china blue quilted bag, and aided by tiredness and a couple of whiskies, was almost instantly asleep.

Billy lay for many minutes looking at the back of Joanna's head and the thick dark curls lying in contrast against the sleeping bag. As soon as he was sure that she was asleep, he switched himself off, and let the trials of the afternoon take their measure of him.

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Most of all, he remembered the wooden floor. Somehow it seemed very old-world to have a pub with a wooden floor, especially one with such a rough surface. It pressed against his cheek, rubbing and hurting, as the masked men ran through the room, ransacking the dead or unconscious. Hands picked roughly at him, darting into his pockets, whilst his brain slowly came back on line. Then he saw the pistol.



It was a Webley .455, the officers' huge revolver sidearm of the late 19th century, designed to stop charging native warriors at short range and a pistol which did that task so effectively that the manufacturers had not changed the design since.

Billy's weapons instructor, a tough Royal Air Force Regiment sergeant, had recognised Billy's inherent proficiency with the 9mm Brownings they were using for personal weapons training, and towards the end of the

course had given him the big Webley to use. Nobody's fool, he hadn't been surprised when the officer cadet scored six out of six on the short pistol range.

The Webley was on the floor alongside what was left of his drinking companion's body after the quiet Belfast pub had been almost destroyed by a rocket attack, and it fitted Billy's hand perfectly as he reached for it, remembering the words of his instructor:-

"Draw back the hammer first, sir; it makes for a much more accurate shot." The sergeant had chuckled. "If you get time, that is."

Billy had time. He thumbed back the hammer and shot the masked man through the back at six feet range, setting his clothing alight. The force of the huge heavy bullet picked up the attacker and threw him against the far wall, like a well directed karate kick. Afterwards, they told him that he had gone berserk; he didn't remember much of that, except that he was still pulling back the hammer and uselessly triggering the Webley long after the sixth round had been fired and the last of the four IRA men was dead. Only then did he find that he had two automatic pistol bullet holes through his left shoulder, and a furrow carved out of the top of his body where a third bullet had torn through his coat and flesh.

Joanna had heard rumours about his past, and had often wondered if she dared ask him about his time as a serviceman, when he never mentioned it himself. She only woke him when he started screaming, and cradled him in her arms like a sick child, stroking his head, soothing him until his eyes opened. Even then she waited until he was fully awake, and then lifted him to a sitting position, pushing back his hair from his sweat-streaked forehead. Wordlessly, she handed

him the remains of his last glass of whisky, and he drank it in one throw. She indicated the bottle, but he shook his head.

"Sorry about that. It doesn't happen very often."

Joanna nodded. "Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked, gently.

Billy remained silent for a little while. "It was Belfast, 1978. I was in the RAF, a Flight Lieutenant navigator on Phantoms. My brother was an Army Captain, doing a tour of duty in Northern Ireland. I spent a weekend's leave with him and we were having a quiet drink in a pub he knew, with a few of his fellow officers. The IRA put a rocket through the back window, and then came in with guns."

"The scars on your shoulder?"

Billy nodded. "They hit me three times." He grinned, without humour, and added, "I killed four of them, though."

Joanna started. "You killed four of them?"

Billy nodded again. "Trouble was, I shot two of them in the back with a revolver someone had dropped. In those days, the authorities didn't like that. I had to resign my commission afterwards. That was when I went into computers. I don't dream about it much now."

Joanna was stunned into silence. She had never equated Billy with anything remotely violent; he seemed too practical, and yet here was the man who always had time to help anyone, saying that he had killed four other men, and two of them from behind.

"Shocking, eh? I haven't made a big thing out of it."

"Your brother - how old was he?"

"A year older; always one rank higher than me, even at school. We used to joke about me looking up to him, until I was flying, and then we joked that he had no choice but to look up at me." He paused. "They let me out of hospital to go to the funerals, and when I got back I saw the newsreels all about the IRA funerals for their men. That was all the media seemed interested in. Well, it was all a long time ago now. Best forgotten about." He looked across at Joanna and, seeing nothing but compassion on her face, remembered how she had been holding him whilst he came out of the nightmare. Suddenly he desperately wanted that feeling of comfort again, and looking into her eyes, realised that she, too wanted something similar. But he crushed the sensation, and lay down.

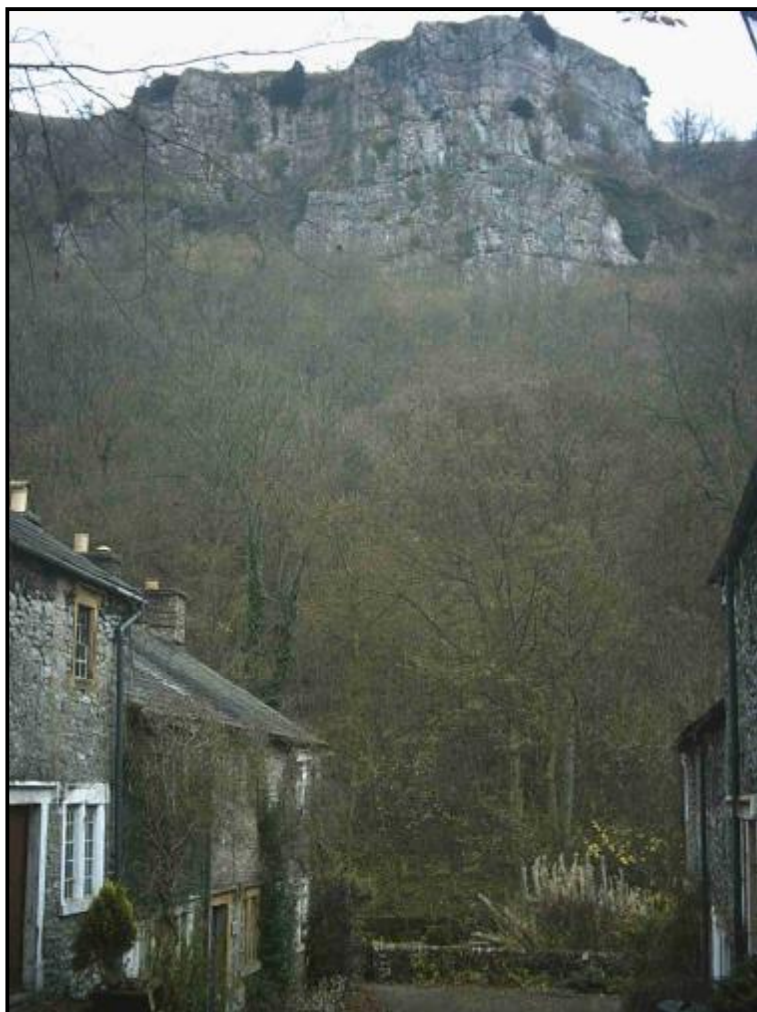
Joanna lay for a long time with her face looking up at the uncurtained window, watching the snow swirl about outside. She thought she heard a muted sob from the other side of the room, but she couldn't be sure.

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She awoke to the smell of coffee and cooking, and it was a few seconds before she identified the smell and stepping out of the sleeping-bag she pulled on her jeans and sweater. Billy must have been waiting for her to wake, and came in at once with a steaming mug of coffee. He kissed her gently on the cheek, and she expected some mention of the previous night's event, but he said nothing, and she actually preferred that. It was the sort of thing for which real friends didn't have to thank each other.

By the time she had descended from the bathroom, the kitchen was deep in steam and a pleasantly sweet smell. "Porridge," explained Billy, "the ideal solution to a cold frosty morning." Joanna hadn't tasted porridge since she had been a child and afterwards had to admit that he was right; she felt ready for anything.

"What's today?" she asked him over mugs of coffee, once they had completed the washing up; "Shall we sit by the fire, or set off into the wild?"



It was no small feat to retrace their steps back to the car, because the snow was still two feet thick and they had to dig their way up the short cobbled road back to the small car park. At least it wasn't still snowing, and once away from the group of cottages and into the woods at the bottom of the steep valley, the snow wasn't anything like as deep, provided that they stayed more or less within the tree line. Their breath marked their way along the meandering track, and apart from their steps, no sound broke the patina of silence which enshrouded the valley.

"What was it like," Joanna asked suddenly, "in the Air Force?"

"Like a closed community, I suppose, you tended to mix with other RAF types even off duty, because they understood the lifestyle, and they knew that often you couldn't talk about your job. So they knew when not to ask questions. I loved the flying. I had a damn good pilot and we worked well together."

He paused for a moment, and then went on, with a catch in his voice, "I'd have flown through the Gates of Hell with him."

"What happened to him?"

"After I left the RAF he retrained in Tornados, and was shot down over Iraq in the first Gulf War."

"Oh, Billy, I'm so sorry."

"Yes, it was a bad show. He was married with two children, too. But as my Dad said, isn't that what they pay you for? It was brutal, but true. We spent years rehearsing and practicing for the big event, and then when it comes to it and you have to press the weapons buttons for real, it's a vindication of everything you ever trained for."

She moved closer, taking his gloved hand in hers, and stopped asking questions. They walked on in silence, listening to the silence, simply looking at the Christmas-card view along the valley, until the trees petered out and they stood at the base of a huge drift which clearly impeded further

progress. Joanna stood still at the view, and Billy stood behind, wrapped his arms around her, and neither of them spoke for several minutes.

"I'm freezing, Billy. Let's go back and have something alcoholic." She turned her head to look at him, the sparkle of snow reflected in her eyes, her dark curls escaping the hood of her coat. Neither of them wanted to stop the kiss, and afterwards Billy felt very confused. *What was that?* he thought, *I've been waiting all my life for that kiss. I've never kissed anyone like that before.* Joanna gave no sign of what inflection she placed on the small intimacy, and stepped off along their tracks leading back to the cottage.

I don't think she has the least idea what she does to me, Billy thought. *But that was good.*

Joanna trounced him at Scrabble until they started playing in French. His barrister-life defence of some of the more obscure French words soon reduced her to laughter, because he knew that she had only a slight knowledge of the language.

"What's for supper?" she asked, packing away the game.

"I'm afraid it's Chef's night off," said Billy, as if to a latecomer to a hotel's dining room, "but I'll see if I can rustle up something. Let me see, how about what I can only describe as a truck driver's fry-up? That is, if you're not counting the calories."

Joanna looked at him. "I'm counting the calories," she said, sadly.

Billy laughed. "So am I, but under the circumstances –" he raised his eyebrows, theatrically.

"Sod it," they both said together.

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After their meal, Billy sat for a long time, prodding the short stubby poker into the red hot coals and then gradually working the glowing tip into a thick section of one of the logs. Each insert resulted in a puff of smoke, like the sharp belch from a cannon. Joanna watched him intently, both of them silent simply because, for the moment, there was nothing for them to say.

"It's a funny thing," said Billy eventually, having worked the poker about half way through the log, "here we are, two people who make their livings from high technology, and what's keeping us content? Hardly the leading edge of computerisation; a truck driver's fry-up, a log fire and a bottle of port." He gazed through the still uncurtained window, abstractedly watching the snow tumbling down outside and gather still more thickly on the trees opposite.

"And each other," added Joanna. She was sitting forward, holding out her hand for the poker. Billy handed it over, and sat back in the old armchair, looking at her as she continued to work the tip between the coals and the deepening hole in the log. Every now and then the fire would give a leap of flame, not enough to make her jump back, but enough to illuminate her face like an old oil painting of seventeenth century children around a kitchen fire.

"Let your hair loose," he said, suddenly wanting to know what the dark mane of curls would look like if she was ever to release it from the ubiquitous scrunchy band. Joanna rested the poker in the short blue flames and, pulling the band away, shook her head. In the firelight she looked so gypsy-like that Billy expected to be able to part the locks about her ears and find giant gold earrings. He sat entranced whilst she continued the task of penetrating the log. In a flash he knew

that he loved her, and it was like one of the dancing flames, a bright flood of warmth and love which flared up, but which then held him firm in its grasp.

"I didn't realise," he remarked, in as even a voice as he was able, and after a long silence, "until I saw you in the firelight, how lovely you are." Immediately, he felt foolish, that he had destroyed in a careless loss of control the easy relationship between himself and the much younger girl. *Damn, damn, damn*, he thought, *why did I have to say that?*

Joanna didn't make any immediate reply, and when she leaned forward, her freed hair hid her face, Billy did not see the tear which ran down her cheek, and she thought, *why did he say that, in such a way that I can't pretend I didn't hear, I can't ignore it?*

"I'll make a drink," he said gruffly, aware of the reason for her silence, and made to stand up. Joanna wiped the tear away with the same movement of her hand which pushed her hair behind her ear, and quickly rose, picking up the two coffee mugs and turning awkwardly in the small front room between the wooden chairs and dining table. "It's all right," she said quietly, "I'll make one."

As she passed him, she reached out with her free hand, and hesitated just long enough for him to take her hand in his, the first time they had touched so in the years they had known each other.

He held on, not tightly, but with enough pressure for her to have to actually pull her hand away. When she hadn't done so after a couple of seconds, he said, in a very quiet voice, hardly daring to voice the thought:-

"Would it be all right if I held you for a little while?"

Joanna looked at him, standing at his shoulder, remembering the few minutes the previous night when he had been in her arms after his nightmare. She saw the open need for her in his eyes, realising with a sharp shock what it had cost him to say such a thing. "I'll make a drink," she said, equally softly, slipping her hand away. Billy didn't dare look round, but he felt the movement of air as she parted the heavy hanging curtain which kept the draughts out of the cosy room, heard the creaky wooden door open into the kitchen and then the bustle of the kettle being boiled. He sat glumly in the glow of the fire, thinking, *now she's got to find a way of saying no without feeling she's upsetting me, I should have kept my feelings to myself, but truly I didn't know how I really felt until just now -*

Joanna came back in quietly, put the two steaming mugs on the fireside table. "What would you like me to do?" she said, as softly as she could, to match his own words. Billy couldn't believe it. He looked at her face, lit square on by the flames, and seeing nothing but transparent honesty, reached for her hands and drew her onto the sofa next to him, resting her across his lap but facing away, her head on the cushion he placed on the armrest, his left hand on her left shoulder and his right arm lightly across her waist. She settled down like a cat, saying nothing, but with her fingertips on his hand, gently touching him and sending sparks up his arm.

"I love you," he said quite suddenly, "but you must know that."

"Yes," she said. "I've known for a long while, long before you said it, perhaps even before you knew it yourself."

She said this so matter-of-factly that Billy wasn't surprised by it. "That's the easy part," he continued, "I mean, loving you is so easy, because you're such a loveable person, anyone would fall for you, and here we are marooned, and I'm sorry but I can't go on without being sure that you know about it. But really, loving you is the easy part, that's something I've always sort of known

about, although I didn't completely let it loose until tonight. The problem that I've got, is how do I love you?"

Joanna turned in his arms, lying on her back across his lap. Billy ached to reach under her sweater to hold her breasts - it was a physical ache, which actually hurt him when he suppressed it. He went on, "Sometimes, when I look at you, I see a girl, the daughter I never had, the person I want to protect and support and encourage to succeed and do all the things that fathers are supposed to do with their favourite daughters.

"Then, sometimes, I look at you, particularly when I was watching you in the firelight, and I see a lovely woman, intelligent, beautiful, desirable, sexy, the person I want to love in the physical way.

"So you see that for me to love you is simple, so easy, compared to knowing how I love you. The first part's easy, the second part's - well - irreconcilable." He paused. "I thought you'd better know, so that you can see what a struggle I have with this."

She thought, *touch me, please, please touch me, I can't ask you to do it, you've got to do it on your own*, as she lifted herself up, and reaching around his neck, kissed him with such passion that he was almost shocked. "What am I tonight, Billy, here, now? The girl or the woman? Which do you want me to be?"

Tormented, he shook his head. "I can't tell you that, Joanna, I can't tell you, if you're the girl, I daren't touch you, if you're the woman, I want you so much, it hurts. I can't decide that, I can't make it the one when it's the other."

"Have I upset you?" he said after she had turned away. She had stopped touching his hand, and he feared that she would take offence at his frankness.

"No, Billy. Look, I need to go upstairs for a moment."

Her footsteps clattered up the staircase from the kitchen and he piled more logs on the fire. Switching on the radio brought a background of orchestral film music, and he let it play. Surprised not to have heard sounds from the bathroom, and having only heard her steps in the bedroom above, he waited whilst she returned. Hearing the wooden kitchen door close and the rush of the draught curtain being drawn, he turned after a few seconds so see her standing framed in the huge wooden beam which split the lower two rooms of the cottage at ceiling level.

Joanna had changed into the old, dull pink paint-spotted dungaree suit that Billy loved to see her in, what she had always referred to as her Andy Pandy suit, the general coverall she wore when getting on with painting, decorating, or any other dirty job around the house. She usually wore an old shirt or sweater beneath it, but now he could see that her shoulders were bare beneath the straps, and that underneath the squared top, he realised that she was naked. He stood up, almost dizzy.

"I don't believe this," he said.

"I'm not the girl, Billy; love me. Love me the way that you would the woman."

"I'm not the type to take advantage -"

"I know. Let's agree that the time and the place and the mood and anything else you care to name is right for us now, and if you still can't make up your mind, perhaps I can help you." She came closer, and drew his arms around her, pulling him close, flattening her breasts against him, feeling his hands on her skin and almost physically aware of the love which was pouring from his

palms into her bare back. Putting up her face, he kissed her, tasting her mouth, feeling the last of his resistance and indecision drop away. "I love you, Jo," he said, between kisses. "I know," she replied, happy in the realisation and its disclosure, and that she too had made decisions about her affection for him which were no less demanding than his own admission.

Billy kissed her neck and shoulders, feeling her shudder and knowing that it wasn't because the little room was cold. She lifted his hands to her breasts, and he held her there for a moment before picking carefully at the chunky buttons which held the straps of her Andy Pandy dungaree top to the chest, and as the second one slid out, he was surprised to see her look down at herself, almost guiltily.

"You won't like them much - they're too small -" she muttered, in such a small voice that she sounded almost miserable.

Billy had never seen anything so lovely. He gently turned her round to face the hearth. In the firelight her skin was transposing into pastel hues of cream, red and gold, her breasts perfectly formed, not the simple mounds of a girl, but the full rounded shape of the woman, nipples set upwards and cheerfully hardening to his touch. So what, he thought, if she's small, she's perfect, I've never seen anything so utterly gorgeous.

He slipped the paint-spattered garment from around her waist, finding that she was still wearing pants, and knelt down before her, reaching around to run his hands through the hems of material at her hips, caressing her bottom, scratching lightly at the sensitive skin just inside the curve of her legs. She shivered, a light tremor which rippled from her head to her feet, and rested her hands on his shoulders as she felt his hands at the elastic waistband of her pants, drawing then gently away from her bottom and hips and down to her feet where she stepped out of them.

Billy expected to find a wild maze of dark curls at the base of her stomach and was astonished to see that she trimmed her pubic hair very short, to give just a shadow of the coarse hair. Holding his palms to the top of her thighs, he rubbed his thumbs wonderingly through and across the dark triangle, feeling the cropped hair bend and prickle beneath his touch. She gasped a little, and her hands tightened on his shoulders. He kissed her just above the line of her darkness, and stood up.

"I said that you were lovely. I was right. You're quite beautiful." His mouth descended to her breasts, kissing the delicate skin under the swell of each, rising to her nipples and gently, then not so gently, sucking at one, then the other, back and forth until she thought she would burst. Physical pleasure exploded in her breasts, ran down her stomach and as he held her bottom, his fingertips just resting inside the cleft, she felt herself wet between her legs and climaxed as Billy transferred his attention to the other nipple.

Joanna was dry-throated. Billy would have carried on, but she held his head to stop him, swallowed awkwardly, and without comment, unfastened his shirt, not waiting to remove it but tackling his belt and waistband, kissing him hungrily as she reached inside his underpants to hold him, feeling his tongue at her lips and mouth as his hardness grew in her hands until she had drawn him into a full, rigid, erection.

She wasn't a virgin, but her sexual experience had only been with one other man, who she now realised had put his own pleasure before hers. Billy's entire technique seemed to her to be directed at winding her sexual spring so tightly that it would explode long before he entered her. He lay her down before the fire, placed a cushion under her head and ran his fingertips over her body from head to toe, stroking, circling, up and down, over and over again, over her face and shoulders, fingertips drifting over her breasts, skiing down her belly and hips, prickling her cropped hair, and lightly scratching her thighs and lower legs. Then, when she thought she couldn't stand

it any more, he turned her over and did the same on her other side, until she was so utterly relaxed in the heat from the fire and their bodies that she half expected to melt.

After what seemed like hours of delicious torture, he turned her on her back again and, watching her face intently, lifted her nearest thigh towards him, rested the palm of his hand across her darkness, his fingers resting immobile between her legs, feeling and testing her heat. "Tell me at once if I hurt you," he whispered, and, with great care, masturbated her with such a delicate touch that she thought she would break in two, such was the intensity of her orgasm. Billy continued to watch as her breathing returned to normal, and then helped her straddle him, pulling her over his erection, sliding easily inside her, feeling himself within her body so completely that it felt like a precision lock snapping into its custom made recess. He was so fully inside her that he could feel the prickle of her pubic hair against his body, and he leaned her forward to kiss and suck her nipples, raising himself against her as she lost herself to the rhythm of her movements.

As she approached her climax he brought her upright, and holding her wrists together in the small of her back, used his other hand to pull her hips hard down on to his. The slightest movement of their hips reached right inside her, every withdrawal and entrance drawing deep within her body like a drag against her soul.

"Oh, God, Billy, I can't help it, I'm coming, I want to wait for you, I'm so sorry –" and she cried out at her climax, cried out again at his and, as their baby was conceived, clung to him. For minutes afterwards, they held each other, knowing he didn't care about the tears across her face. Knowing that there was no need for an explanation of how much she had wanted to give herself to him, how much she had wanted to transcend the demarcation between friendship and intimacy. Knowing that whilst some would call it lust, those who had had such an experience could never give it such a sordid title. Yet her feelings didn't fit any convenient label; too rare for that, needing delineation in an unique unclassifiable domain.

Then she gracefully collapsed over him like a puppet whose strings are cut. Again he waited until her breathing was normal. "I thought it was the bloke who was supposed to go to sleep immediately afterwards?" he chuckled, but, receiving no response, eased her sweating limbs into a comfortable position, and, covering her with the sleeping-bag, lay with her until it was clear she was not simply dozing. Only then did he gently carry her to the sofa, where he let her sleep.

□

In the morning, she woke feeling completely, sexually had. Joanna had never felt really sexually had before and it was such a new, fulfilling sensation that she lay for quite some time concentrating on what it felt like. She felt such a new kind of ache between her legs and inside her body that it defied any previous description. She just felt totally, utterly had, and it was wonderful. Jesus Christ and all the saints, she thought, why was sex never like this before? I've had sex in the past, but last night I made love.

Billy bustled in from the kitchen with a bucket full of logs. "Ah, you're awake? But you've slept the clock round."

"What?"

"You've slept twelve hours."

Joanna was astonished. "What time is it?" she said, incredulously.

Billy laughed. "Time for a coffee, Joanna my love." Leaving the bucket of logs by the fire, he plonked two of the biggest pieces of wood on the fire and sat on the edge of the sofa. "And yes," he said seriously, "I do still respect you in the morning."

"Billy – last night – that was fantastic. I've never enjoyed it so much."

"Nor have I. I love you, Jo. I'm going to spend the rest of my life proving it." He paused. "I didn't hurt you, did I? It was a bit carrying-away like."

She blushed. "I feel a little achy, but it's a lovely kind of ache."

"That's all right then. You're a lovely kind of girl."

"If I'd have known it would be like that with you, I would have seduced you years ago."

"Nice girls don't say things like that."

"They do when it's true. What are we going to do, Billy? Afterwards? This isn't a dream, is it? Is there a you and me when we get out of here?"

"There is, if you want one. Do you want a you and me?"

Joanna smiled, and took his hands in hers. "Yes," she said, simply.

"Oh well, that's all right then. You move in with me, and next thing you know, you're Mrs Billy with four little Billies."

Joanna suddenly knew that she was pregnant. It was no fleeting sensation, but a powerful, solid conviction. There was a moment of blind panic, and then a warm, cheerful glow.

"Crystal," she said, absently.

"What?"

"Our daughter," said Joanna. Billy looked at her quizzically. "Believe me," she went on, "I know." He chuckled.

"Appropriate name," he said, and pulling her to him, raised his eyes to the still uncurtained window, watching the flakes tumble into the courtyard between the row of old cottages. Already the snow was melting. But today was the first day of the rest of his life.