

Swimming Lessons

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For Henry, Tim, and India



Gil Coleman looked down from the first-floor window of the bookshop and saw his dead wife standing on the pavement below. He had been among the shelves all afternoon, thumbing through the secondhand books from front to back, pausing at folded-over corners, or where the text had been underlined, flicking through the pages to persuade them to offer up what might be hiding between the leaves. The cup of tea that Viv had brought for him had cooled, forgotten on the window seat. At about three o'clock he had picked up *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, a book he recognised and thought he might already own. It had fallen open, and there, tucked between the pages, he had been surprised to see a folded sheet of thin yellow paper with blue faint lines.

Trembling, Gil had sat beside the cup and turned the book sideways so he could open the note without removing it. One of his rules was that the things he found must never be taken out from their original location. He lifted both the book and the piece

of paper up to the rain-streaked window. It was another letter, handwritten in black ink, and when he squinted he could read the date—2nd July 1992, 2:17 PM—and, under that, his own name. The text below that was smaller, and the writer had paid no attention to the lines provided but had allowed their writing to slope downhill, as if they had written it at speed.

He patted the breast of his jacket, swapped the book to his other hand and dipped into the inside pockets, then tapped the sides of his trousers. No reading glasses. He moved the letter nearer and farther away from his face to bring the writing into focus, and leaned closer to the window. The light was poor; the storm that had been forecast for Saturday had arrived a day early. When Gil had locked his car in the car park beside the Jurassic Crazy Golf playground, he saw that the wind had wrapped a plastic bag around one of the front claws of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*, so that the creature appeared to be about to step over the wire fence on its way to do some shopping. And as Gil had walked along the promenade to the bookshop, the wind had gouged troughs in the grey sea and flung the top edges of the waves towards the land, so that now, standing amongst the old books, he could taste salt on his lips.

A blast of rain rapped on the window, and that was when he turned to look out and down to the narrow street below.

On the pavement opposite, a woman in an oversized greatcoat stood gazing along the road. Only the tips of her fingers showed from the ends of the sleeves, and the bottom hem came almost to her ankles. The coat was a dirty olive colour from the rain—the cast of the sea after a shower—and it occurred to Gil that his daughter Flora would know the colour's proper name. The woman pushed a strand of wet hair off her face with the back of her wrist and turned

towards the bookshop. The gesture was so shockingly familiar that Gil stood up and was unaware of knocking over his cup of tea. The woman tilted her heart-shaped face to look up, as if she knew Gil was watching, and in that moment he understood that the woman was his wife; older, but without doubt, he thought, her. The rain had flattened and darkened her hair, and the water dripped off her chin, but she stared at him in the same defiant way she had when he'd first met her. He would have known that expression and that woman anywhere.

Ingrid.

Gil slammed his palm against the windowpane, but the woman turned away and stared along the street again, towards the town and, as if she had seen the person or car she was waiting for, strode off. He hit the window again but the woman didn't stop. He pressed his cheek sideways against the cold glass and saw her for a moment more before she was gone from view. "Ingrid!" he called, pointlessly.

He snapped shut the book he was holding and, clasping it to his chest, hurried down the stairs, then to the front of the shop and through the door. From behind the till Viv called to him, but he kept going. Outside, the rain pasted his grey hair to his forehead and soaked through his jacket. The street was empty but he marched along it, every two or three steps breaking into a trot. By the time he reached the high street, Gil was puffing and struggling to catch his breath. He stood on the corner and looked up the hill. The pavement was empty. In the other direction, towards the sea, some tourists hurried, the squall bowling them closer to the water. He limped after them, scanning the people ahead for the large coat and glancing through the steamy windows of the café and the bakery. He weaved around a young woman with a buggy and, ignoring

a stab of pain in his hip, crossed the road at the corner without checking for cars. He was on the promenade, eight feet or so above the beach. In the distance, a man walked at an angle against the gale while an ugly dog jumped and snapped at the wind—too fierce for May, more like an autumn storm. Gil slowed but continued to shuffle, head lowered, along the promenade until below him the sand ended and the breakwater boulders and the massive concrete blocks began, wet with leaping spray. The rain flew in his face and the wind buffeted him, pushing him into the metal railing at the edge of the walkway, tilting him over it as though he were being passed from hand to hand in a violent dance. Between the rocks, about a dozen paces farther along and below him, Gil thought he saw a jut of olive and the whip of lifted hair.

“Ingrid!” he shouted, but the wind took his words, and the woman, if that’s what he had seen, didn’t even turn her head. He continued along the promenade in her direction. Twice he stopped to lean out over the railing, but the angle and the height of the walkway—together with how she was hunkered down—meant he lost sight of her. When he judged that he must be above Ingrid, he tipped forwards over the railing again, but now couldn’t even see her coat. He put his head and torso in the wide gap between the top and bottom bars, and, with the book in one hand and the other on a vertical post, Gil inched his left leg over the lower railing, swivelling it awkwardly so his foot remained on the lip of the promenade, while he negotiated his right over the bottom rail. When he was on the other side, he clung on to the wet post with his free hand and cantilevered his body out, but his left foot in its leather brogue slipped.

It seemed to Gil that he fell in slow motion into the void, so there was plenty of time to think about the fuss his eldest daughter,

Nan, would make, and how worried Flora would be, and then he thought about whether, if he survived this fall, he should ask his children to promise to make a pyre of his books when he did die, and what a sight that would be. The fire, a beacon announcing his death, might be visible as far as the Isle of Wight. And Gil considered that if today was the 2nd of May 2004, which he thought it probably was, it meant Ingrid had been gone for eleven years and ten months exactly, and he also thought how he should have made it clearer that he had loved her. All this went through his mind while he fell between the rocks, and then there was pain in his arm and bursts of light in his head, but before the blackness swallowed him up he saw the book open beside him, its spine cracked in two.

Chapter 1

The ringing woke Flora from a deep sleep. Richard, lying next to her, had a pillow over his head, so she climbed across him and out into the cold and gloomy room. She stepped over the debris of clothes, empty bottles, and dirty plates on the floor, picked up an old tablecloth that she kept on the sofa to hide the greasy stains left by the previous tenants, and wrapped it around her like a cloak. The ringing stopped. Flora sighed, and at the end of her out-breath the ringing started again. She listened and then rummaged through the clothes until she found her jeans with her mobile phone in the pocket. *Nan*, the display said. Richard rolled over in the bed with a groan and Flora went through to the bathroom.

“Nan?” she said, pulling the light cord and wincing at the glare.

“Hello? Flora?”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” Flora said. “I should have called. Happy birthday for yesterday.”

“Thanks,” Nan said, “but I’m not calling about that.” Her tone was urgent, worried, and a creature uncoiled itself inside Flora’s stomach.

“What is it?” Flora’s voice was a whisper. She sank onto the lino, slotting herself between the bath and the basin’s pedestal. Close up, the abstract swirls and eddies embroidered on the tablecloth transformed themselves into silvery-blue fish swimming over her knees.

“What?” Nan said. “I can’t hear you properly. The reception’s terrible. Flora? Hello?” Nan’s voice was too loud. “It’s about Dad,” she shouted.

“Daddy?” Flora said, her mind already spinning towards all the possible scenarios.

“There’s no need to worry immediately, but . . .”

“What?”

“He’s had an accident.”

“An accident? What? When?”

“I can’t hear you,” Nan said.

Flora stood up, stepped into the bath, and opened the window onto the gap below ground level. It was dark outside, confusingly dark. A blast of wind blew in, and above her shapes of trees and shrubs thrashed back and forth. “Is that better?”

“That’s better,” Nan said, still shouting. “Dad fell off the promenade in Hadleigh. Cuts and bruises, concussion maybe, a sprained wrist. Nothing serious . . .”

“Nothing serious—are you sure? Should I come now?”

“. . . or maybe he jumped,” Nan continued.

“Jumped?”

“No, don’t come now.”

“Off the promenade?”

“Flora, do you have to repeat everything I say?”

“Well, tell me then!”

“Are you drunk?”

“Of course not,” Flora said, although she may still have been.

“Or stoned? Are you stoned?”

An unexpected laugh bubbled out of Flora. “No one says *stoned* anymore, Nan. It’s *high*.”

“So you’re high.”

“I was asleep,” Flora said. “Tell me! What’s happened?”

“Have you just got up? It’s nine thirty in the evening, for goodness’ sake.” Nan sounded outraged.

“In the evening?” Flora said. “Isn’t it morning?”

Nan tutted and Flora could imagine her sister shaking her head.

“I was up all last night,” Flora said. She had no intention of telling Nan that she and Richard had stayed in bed for the past two days. That twice Flora had pulled on jeans and a jumper and run to the shop on the Stockbridge Road to buy another couple of bottles of wine, a lump of plastic cheddar, sliced white bread, baked beans, and chocolate. Richard had offered to go, but Flora had needed those ten minutes away from him. When she had returned and let herself in through the basement door, she had dropped the bags and her jeans, and climbed back under the covers.

“Doing what?” Nan said. “Oh, Flora, you’re not late with an essay, are you?”

“Are you in the hospital? Can I speak to him?”

“He’s sleeping. Flora, there are a couple of other things.” Her sister sniffed and rustled as if wiping her nose, and then took a deep breath. “He told me he saw Mum outside the bookshop in

Hadleigh, wearing his old greatcoat—the one you used to dress up in—and that he followed her to the breakwater boulders.”

Adrenalin rushed through Flora, a wave surging out from her centre to her limbs, the ends of her fingers, and up to her head. “Mum? In Hadleigh?” The scent of coconut came to her, inextricably linked with the colour of golden honey, sweet and clean, from amongst the thorns and dying flowers of gorse.

“He didn’t though,” Nan said. “He just thought he did. It’s probably his age or the concussion.”

“Yes,” Flora whispered. The wind splattered rain at her, and she ducked back inside the bathroom, leaning towards the window to keep the phone signal strong.

“Flora, are you still there?” Nan said into her ear.

“Still here,” Flora said. “I’m coming to the hospital. I’ll pack a bag and get the next train.”

“No, don’t do that. Dad’s sleeping. I was hoping they might discharge him tonight, but it’s too late for that now. It’ll be tomorrow morning after someone from the mental health team has seen him.”

“The mental health team? What’s wrong with him?”

“Flora, calm down,” Nan said. “They’re just ruling things out. It’s probably a urinary tract infection. Come over tomorrow. I’ll meet you at home and we can talk.” The Swimming Pavilion: home. They both still called it that, although neither lived there now.

“I want to see him.”

“You will, in the morning. Make sure you check the bus timetable for the ferry. Don’t get stuck like last time.”

Flora had forgotten her sister’s irritating habit of thinking of everything that anyone might require.

When they had said good-bye, Flora put her phone on the side of the sink and brushed her teeth. As she turned to go, she knocked her mobile and it fell into the toilet with a plop.

The light was on in the main room—kitchen, bedroom, and sitting room—but Richard, who must have got up, was now back under the covers with his eyes closed. The dirty plates had gone from the floor and were stacked on the table, the remains of the food scraped into the bin. In her food cupboard Flora found a box of Rice Krispies and dropped her phone inside. She sat on the sofa, trying to imagine her father broken and bruised in a hospital bed, but she could only see him wiry and brown, striding beside her over the heath, or showing her another book he'd found. She thought about her mother walking around Hadleigh right now, or sitting in a shop or a pub or a café. It made her hands shake and the creature in her stomach flip over. And then she realised that her mother wouldn't be in any of those places; she would be waiting for them at home.

Flora watched Richard sleeping. There was no noise of wind or rain in the main room. The ceiling bulb shone full on his face and he looked different without his glasses, not just younger, but blanker, more unformed. She kneeled beside the bed and scabbled underneath it for her suitcase.

“Who was that?” Richard said, opening one eye.

“No one,” Flora said, tugging at what she hoped was a handle.

“Why are you wearing that? Isn't it a tablecloth? You must be bloody freezing. Come back to bed.” He lifted up the duvet to reveal his torso.

“Oh,” she said, “I'd forgotten about that.”

“What?” Richard craned his neck forwards to stare at his body. He clawed with his free hand on the shelf below the bedside table and brought up his glasses. When he put them on, he gasped in mock surprise. Between the brown hairs that covered his chest and flowed from his belly button was an anatomical drawing of his insides—ribs, sternum, clavicle, the start of his pelvis, and the wrapped snake of his intestines—all in indelible black felt-tip. “You have to come back to bed.” He leaned over to pull her towards him. “I don’t have any arms or legs yet. You need to finish your drawing or I can’t go back to work.” He smiled.

“Did you know it’s nine thirty?” Flora said, giving another yank on the suitcase handle and toppling backwards onto the carpet.

“Nine thirty? In the morning?” Richard dropped the duvet.

“No, in the bloody evening,” Flora said.

Richard reached out again for the shelf below the bedside table. This time he brought up his phone plugged into his charger, and Flora felt a flash of irritation not only that he had remembered to charge it but also that he had been sensible enough to put it somewhere safe.

He gave a long whistle. “Nine thirty. Maybe it’s nine thirty tomorrow and we missed the whole of Saturday. Work is going to be really pissed off with me.”

Flora gave up on the suitcase, went to the drawer where she kept her underwear and rooted through it.

“Is everything all right?” He sat up in bed to watch her.

“It was Nan,” Flora said. “On the phone.”

“Your grandmother?”

“Nanette. My sister.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister. Older or younger?”

“Five and a half years older,” Flora said. She dumped a handful of knickers and bras in the middle of the floor. She returned to the chest of drawers to go through her jeans and jumpers.

“What did she want?”

“I have to go home.”

“Right now? As in, this instant?”

“Yes, right now,” she said as she dropped another pile of clothes on the first and turned to him. “As in, immediately. Daddy’s been taken to hospital, and I need you to get up so I can get my suitcase from under the bed.”

“Daddy?” Richard said.

“Yes. Gil, my father. Do you have to repeat everything I say?” Flora stood with her fists on her hips. Richard got out of the bed, found his pants and jeans, and pulled them on. He bent to get her suitcase and sat on the side of the bed, watching her pack. The case had belonged to her mother and was made of blue cardboard, with rounded corners. Flora was facing away from him, but she could feel Richard’s mind working.

“Hang on,” he said. “Gil? Your father’s called Gil? And isn’t your surname Coleman?”

Flora sighed. She hadn’t realised he knew her surname. It had taken a little less than two weeks for Richard to work it out. That wasn’t bad; once, she had discovered that a boy had only slept with her after he had found out who her father was. She never returned his calls.

“*That* Gil Coleman?” Richard said. “The Gil Coleman who wrote *A Man of Pleasure*?” She knew without turning around what the expression on his face would be, and that was why, she reminded herself, she must never sleep with a bookshop assistant again.

“That’s the one,” Flora said, pressing sketchbooks and a box of charcoal on top of her clothes.

“My God. Gil Coleman is your father. I can’t believe it. I thought he was dead. He hasn’t written anything else since that book, has he?”

“I expect you think it’s all a bit *I Capture the Castle*.” Flora tried to laugh it off. But looking at Richard from where she sat on top of the case trying to lock it, she could see he had remembered that there was something else; another thing that was memorable about Gil Coleman apart from the book he had written. It was coming and it was best to get it over with, and then she could leave and not see Richard again. The suitcase clicked shut.

“Wait,” he said, sitting up straight, with one hand on his forehead and the other in the air, as if she had been doing something to stop him thinking. “Wait, I know this story.”

“It isn’t a story, Richard. It’s my family.”

“No, of course, sorry.” He was still trying to remember when she turned away from him and dropped the tablecloth around her feet. She opened the case again, took out a clean pair of knickers and pulled them on. She found her jeans, sniffed the crotch, and stepped into them. She didn’t look at Richard because she couldn’t bear to see the dawning of that little piece of knowledge.

Flora picked up a bra, tried to hook it together, missed the catches, tried again, and heard him say a short, embarrassed “Oh.” When the bra caught, she squatted beside the bed and fought her way into a T-shirt that had been lying there. Richard leaned forwards and gently took hold of her wrist. The black shoulder socket she had drawn on him flexed as his arm moved, and he said, “I’m sorry. About your mother.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” Flora said brightly. “She might not be dead.”

“But,” Richard said, “I thought she—”

“The newspapers,” Flora spoke over him, “got it wrong.”

“—drowned . . . a long time ago,” Richard finished.

“I . . .” Flora started. “She’s lost, that’s all.” The coconut smell and the golden honey colour came again, her mother turning in sunlight. “We don’t know what happened. And it was eleven years ago. But now she’s back. Daddy saw her in Hadleigh.” Flora couldn’t hide her excitement.

“What?” Richard still had hold of her wrist.

“I can’t go into it now. I just have to get home. He needs me.” She sat on the bed beside him. She knew she wouldn’t see Richard again, because he would look at her differently now that he had learned who she was. She hated it when her parents became the thing men found most interesting about her.

“Let me drive you.” His hand slipped from her wrist and held her fingers. “Is Hadleigh where your father lives?”

“Nearby. I’ll get the last train; it’s no problem. You probably need to get back too.” She was aware of the change in his posture at these words, a realization of what she might mean.

“When does it go?” Richard stood up, pressed his phone.

“About ten, I think.”

“That’s in fifteen minutes. Flora, you won’t make it. Take my car.”