

and responsibilities. Their faces, even when they looked kind and friendly, wearing that veil of care and selflessness. Like mine used to, I suppose, though I never recognized it.

When I got home – just a hour or so ago – I floated up and down the stairwell a few times, to check I could still do it and clear my head – gracious, it does feel good for you – and then rang Hogg and Sons, to tell them to start divorce proceedings. I was put through to Hogg Junior, who sounded very cautious; it's possible I was still panting a little from the exertion of the flight, and my cheerfulness may have struck him as odd, in the circumstances. He insisted he couldn't take instructions like that over the telephone, and said I should write, or call round in person.

I couldn't face another outing, so I picked up my pen to draft him a letter. But I wasn't really in the mood, and somehow found myself writing this, instead.

SUMMER STORM

The chalet had gaslights. And shiny satin counterpanes on the beds, a brass barometer in the hallway outside the kitchen, and four wooden steps from the verandah down to the pebble beach.

After we'd explored it we all stood on the verandah, overlooking the sea. Below us were two steep banks of pebbles, and then the breaking waves. Far out the sea was dark blue, but closer in, paler and yellowy.

'We'll be shipwrecked sailors,' Mummy said, 'abandoned on our desert island. We'll fish for our food, and live off the sea.'

Marie didn't like Mummy saying this, her face became twisted and unhappy. She said it wasn't an island and we hadn't been abandoned, and Mummy was stupid to say things like that.

Davey asked what were we going to catch when we'd only got nets, and there were no rock pools or sand, just pebbles.

'You wait till low tide,' Mummy said. She put her arm round Marie and jiggled her shoulders. 'Come on sweetie,' she said. 'This is a holiday, cheer up.'

We went for a walk along the beach track before we had supper. There was a whole row of chalets like ours, the people in the one next door had a red speed boat, pulled up onto the pebbles just above the sea.

Mummy said the grassy bank alongside the track was the sea wall.

There used to be a railwayline behind it, she said, but it was washed away ten years ago, when the sea broke through in a terrible winter storm. There were floods all along the coast, she said.

'Is that why the sea's called The Wash?' I asked. 'Because it washes things away?'

She said not really, it was called The Wash because it was so shallow, and washed in and out.

Davey said it wasn't fair, exciting things always happened ages ago, before he'd been born. Mummy laughed and said I hadn't been born either, not till the summer afterwards, and Marie'd only been three, and anyway there hadn't been any floods in London.

'What happened to the chalets?' Marie asked with a frown.

'They were all swept inland,' Mummy said. 'Way back, right over the railwayline.'

I think Marie was a bit frightened by this, but Davey and I weren't. When we got back from the walk we crawled into the dark space underneath the chalet. Above us it was just wood, painted with black tarry stuff, and the verandah at the front was propped up on concrete blocks. The chalet was a boat really. Davey said he hoped there was another huge storm.

Mummy lit the gaslights and we ate the corned beef hash we'd brought with us from London. Mummy said poo, weren't the gaslights smelly but I liked them: they hissed and made everything in the room look soft. Then we played racing demon, with four packs, and I won twice. Afterwards Marie asked if she could brush Mummy's hair, and Mummy said she was a big baby but she supposed so. She took all the pins out and let her hair fall down her back. Mummy has long black hair and when it was down she looked wild and young. Sometimes I wished my hair was like that instead of short, though mostly I didn't because then I couldn't pretend to be a boy.

While Marie was brushing Mummy's hair Davey went off and got

the shiny red counterpane from his bed. He draped it over her shoulders and Marie spread her hair out over it.

'You look like a queen,' Davey said, 'and Marie and Claire are the princesses, and I'm the prince.'

I said, 'But I want to be a prince too,' and Mummy said of course I could be, I could be anything I liked.

Then Marie spoiled it by saying, 'I wish Daddy was here, he could be the king.' It was a silly thing to say, because Daddy wasn't there, and anyway he wasn't like a king, the way Mummy was like a queen. It made Mummy sigh and say it was long past our bedtimes.

In the morning the tide was out, and the sea looked more like an enormous lake. You had to cross miles of soft wet sand to reach it. Mummy said we could walk as far as we liked into the water, and we'd never be out of our depths. She sent us off with a big plastic bucket and the nets to find food. Marie didn't want to go, she wanted to stay with Mummy and go to the shop, but Mummy said if she didn't fish she wouldn't eat, and that was that. She told us to bring everything we caught back, and she'd tell us what was food and what wasn't.

There were millions of shrimps. So many the nets jumped with them as you lifted them out of the water. They were grey and see-through; you could see their stomachs like little black worms inside them. And there were small flat fish, about three inches long. We never saw them in the water, like the shrimps, they just appeared in the nets, and then tried to bury themselves in the sand at the bottom of the bucket.

We caught lots of crabs too. When we were a long way out, so the chalet was just a dot in the distance, Davey suddenly got the funny-horrors, and said crabs were biting his toes. He'd been scared by seeing the lobster pot, with a big black claw sticking out. We'd thrown shells at it and it had moved. He was laughing but frightened too, so Marie took the bucket and I gave him a piggyback all the way home.

Mummy said not to collect crabs unless we wanted to play with

them, because they weren't the kind you could eat. The little fish were dabs, she said, they were fine, and so were the shrimps. She said we'd missed the cockles, which were the best of all, and showed us how to dig in the wet sand for them, fat round shells, just under the surface. She broke one open on the pebbles and ate it. We all screamed at her, because it must have been alive, but she just said yum yum in a gloating voice and did it again.

For lunch we had shrimp and cockle sandwiches. Everybody liked the cockles, except for a few gritty bits, and the shrimps too, though they took a long time to peel. Mummy ate the dabs, we didn't like the bones.

And that's what we did everyday, when the tide was low. Fishing's exciting, like hunting, and you never get tired of eating things you've caught. Anyway there wasn't much to do in the chalet. Davey decided the barometer must be broken. Mummy said you could tap it, gently, and it was the movement that was important, but every time Davey and I tapped it it stayed where it was, stuck on 'Fair'. Marie wanted it to go up to 'Fine', and Davey and I wanted it to go round to 'Stormy', so we could be swept away in our chalet-boat.

We swam at every high tide. Mummy let us change in the sitting room, so we could just run down the pebble banks into the sea. Davey got cold quickly because he was so thin, but Marie and I stayed in the water for hours. Marie seemed much more cheerful when she was swimming, almost like she'd been the last year, before she got so grown up and serious. I loved playing with Marie. I never minded it when she did things better than me, not like with Davey, when it made me angry and I had to try and beat him. Mummy didn't swim. She sometimes paddled at low tide, with her skirt tied in a knot at the front, but at high water she usually sat in a deck chair on the verandah watching us, and rubbing Davey warm. I think that's why Marie was so happy, because Mummy was close and she could see her all the time.

At supper on the fourth day Mummy told us that when we got back

to London Daddy would have taken all his things and moved away to his new flat. Marie started to cry and Davey got cross with her; we all knew Daddy had a flat and even Marie had liked going up and down in the lift when we visited it, so really Mummy wasn't telling us anything new. She said we'd still see him at weekends and it was what they both wanted and it was nobody's fault. We only saw Daddy properly at weekends anyway, because he worked so late, so I couldn't see that it was going to make much difference. Davey and I went out to play after supper and agreed that Marie was being soppy. I felt a bit angry with her too by then; we'd played together all the time the year before and she'd become so different, and I hated the way she fussed around Mummy.

The next morning Davey caught an octopus. Mummy didn't believe us at first, till we showed it to her. It was about four inches long and transparent. She said it must be a jelly fish, but then looked closer and said goodness, it really was an octopus. It must be a baby, she said, washed up here by mistake. We were so interested in it that we left it too long in the bucket and it died, but Mummy said it would probably have died anyway, in such cold water, and we shouldn't be upset. We buried it in the pebbles under the chalet.

In the afternoon the needle on the barometer moved. It dropped to 'Changeable', though when we looked outside nothing much seemed to have changed. Mummy took us into Hunstanton on the bus and we had high tea in a café and bought postcards for Daddy. The lady who served us was surprised that none of us wanted fish with our chips. I chose sausages, Davey a pie, and Mummy and Marie had chicken. The chicken was very expensive but Mummy said she was treating Marie and we'd made our choices and she didn't want to hear any complaints. I liked it much better when Mummy fussed over Marie, rather than the other way round, so I kicked Davey when he whined about it.

Then after the chicken Marie didn't want to write her postcard.

Mummy said she must or Daddy would worry, and so would she. In the end she made it into a game. She numbered the postcards one, two and three, and Davey wrote on the first 'We cort an octapuss', then after Mummy had explained the game I wrote on the second, 'We did so too, Mummy didn't believe us either'. That made Marie smile, and although you could see she didn't really want to, she picked up the third and wrote, 'It had eight legs and a beak and Mummy says we must be the only children ever to have caught an octopus in England. Regretfully it died.' Mummy grinned over the postcards, especially Marie's, and said they'd make Daddy laugh, and we stamped and posted them.

When we got back to the chalet the barometer said, 'Rain'. It wasn't raining, but Mummy said that wasn't important and the needle had moved down very fast, and it did look as if we might get a storm. The sea was only half-way up the sand and the waves were still just ripples of foam, but it had got much windier, and the sky was dark yellow. Mummy looked pleased and said she liked a good storm, especially at the seaside, and if there was one we could stay up till high tide. Davey worked out that that would be at ten o'clock and bounced up and down shouting 'Can I really stay up till ten?' and Mummy said yes, just this once. Marie looked anxious and asked whether the water would reach the chalet. Mummy said no, it would just be a summer storm and they had lots of storms here, and she mustn't worry.

We started to hear the sea from indoors by seven o'clock. Davey and I went outside to look at it: the waves had got much bigger and curved over into green tunnels just before they broke. They'd reached the pebbles and were making them hiss. While we were outside the man from next door pulled his speed boat up the beach on wooden rollers and covered it with a grey tarpaulin. We helped him hold the ends down because it was flapping around so much in the wind. He said we were in for a real blow tonight. When we went in again Mummy had lit the gas lights and suddenly it looked very dark outside, and began to rain.

At eight o'clock we had Ovaltine and pieces of chocolate stuffed inside a long loaf. Marie kept jumping up every time the wind gusted and rattled the windows. Mummy said she must stop being a silly girl and such a worrier, and she'd never put us in danger, or anywhere she couldn't look after us.

Marie asked if she could brush Mummy's hair again and Mummy sighed and said why not.

She looked even more beautiful this time, because of the wind and rain and noise outside. Davey said there was electricity in her eyes. He asked if she would wear the counterpane again and she smiled and said only if everyone dressed up. So Davey ran round collecting all the counterpanes; I wore the yellow one, like a Roman toga, with my leather belt on top. Davey did the same, but he had to have his pinned up, to stop him tripping over it. Marie had the dark blue one and wore it over her hair, so she looked mysterious and foreign, like an Indian lady. Mummy wore the red one again and laughed at us, and while she was laughing a great gale of wind blew the verandah door open. We had to lock it to keep it shut.

Davey ran to the barometer and said it read 'Stormy' now, and Mummy grinned and said any fool could tell that. She held her hand up and said: just listen.

We all listened, standing there in our counterpanes, and the sea was a great roar in the darkness outside, louder even than the wind and rain. Davey wanted to go out onto the verandah to see it, but Mummy said not until high tide, because we'd get so wet, and we must wait for the right moment. But the rain kept hitting the windows and Marie cried that it was waves, and we were being swept away, so Mummy opened the window and shone the flash lamp outside, to show her how far away the sea was, and calm her down.

We sang car songs then, ones about the sea, Admiral Benbow, and William Taylor. Davey looked so funny in his counterpane that I kept

laughing instead of singing, and he pretended to get cross but really he was showing off.

Then it was ten o'clock and Mummy said it was time to go outside. She unlocked the verandah door and it burst open on its own and sent a great gale of wind round the room. The counterpanes blew out behind us and made a tremendous flapping noise.

Mummy called, 'Are you ready?' with her hair flying behind her above the counterpane. She gave Davey the flash lamp and took me and Marie by the hand.

Outside it was hard to breathe at first. The wind was like a wall, you had to push yourself against it, and turn your face to one side to get air. The rain seemed to be coming from the sea, not the sky, and when Davey shone the lamp into the blackness it looked like white rods, shooting towards us. You could see the breaking waves even without the torch, and the noise of the pebbles being sucked down the beach was so loud it hurt your ears. Some of the rain wasn't rain at all, it was the sea, you could taste it.

Marie cried that the sea was too close, and she didn't like it. Every time a wave humped up ready to break she sobbed, and said it would reach us. Mummy shouted that no wave could reach us, and that this was the worst the storm would get, and look, we were fine. She made us stand in a row and said we had to shout, that that was how you showed you weren't afraid, and that storms were for shouting into.

Davey gave a little yell, and I did too, to see what it sounded like. Mummy cried, 'Louder, louder!' and I saw Davey's chest swell so I took a big breath too and we both yelled as loud as we could.

I heard Mummy cry, 'Marie, you shout too, shout the storm away.'

I thought Marie wasn't going to, she was half-turned away and shaking her head, but Mummy was yelling too now, and suddenly I heard Marie's voice, a great loud voice, loudest of all, screaming, as if the sea was the enemy. I couldn't believe she could make so much noise.

It made us all shout louder, and then we were all shouting together, like we were one person and part of the storm and everything in the world seemed to be made of noise. I could feel Mummy's hand holding me very tightly, sort of squeezing a message to me, and it made me reach for Davey's hand too. And holding onto Mummy and Davey I suddenly knew that we were doing this for Marie, and that Mummy had needed me to help her, and make Marie scream, and not be afraid. I was so proud that I was helping Mummy and Marie, and so happy in the storm, that I shouted and shouted and shouted, till my chest and throat hurt.