

Don't Look Now

It was gone four o'clock when the young couple boarded the ferry in Bodinnick. They were holding hands in the sunshine. She was in her late twenties, slightly built and brightly dressed for summer. He was younger, almost boyish. They walked past the half dozen cars that had embarked for the crossing and stopped when they reached the metal rails at the front of the boat. Cables at the sides jolted tight and hauled the ramp up from the slipway. The engine revved a little higher and the boat began to move out slowly across the water. There were rowing boats on the foreshore, waiting for the tide, their anchor ropes pulled taut. The air was thick with the smells of the river. Black seaweed was crackling and drying in the sun. Trees cast shadows over the water.

The young woman pushed her hair back, smiled and turned to face the man. She took both his hands in hers and began to swing their arms from side to side. She was carefree, almost dancing, when suddenly she caught sight of something and stopped. Her body tensed.

Don't look now, she said, but...

But what? said the young man and grinned. The young woman squeezed his hand a little harder, briefly pressed it to her lips and let it fall.

Listen, Alex, there's a woman over there..., she said, more urgently, and the young man turned at once to look. At the back of the ferry were two elderly women. They must have boarded just before the boat left. They were wearing the grey headscarves of a religious order. Their heads were lowered, deep in conversation.

The young woman pulled the man round so his back was towards them, then she crouched down slightly in front of him.

Who are they? he said.

I think one of them is my old headmistress, Miss Connolly. Don't move. She mustn't see me.

The young man, however, who was smiling at the unfolding little drama, turned again, looked directly at the elderly women, and waved.

There, that's not so bad, is it? he said. He placed his arms on her shoulders and kissed her forehead.

Please don't, she said and pushed him away, don't embarrass me.

The ferry took just a couple of minutes to reach the far side of the river. The ramp scraped down onto the concrete. Cars started their engines. The couple walked up the slipway and, as the cars drove past, Alex called across,

Excuse me, but my friend says you were once her teacher.

The elderly woman stopped. She turned towards the young couple. For a moment there was a look of alarm on her face.

You must remind me of your name, she said to the young woman.

Jessica, she replied almost inaudibly, Jessica Miller.

Yes, said the older woman slowly, I believe I remember you now. You went to Durham, I think? The young woman said nothing in reply. She stood quietly. She placed her hands neatly behind her back and looked down at her feet. *You know, I never forget a face,* said the older woman to her friend, and smiled.

The young couple walked back past Fowey Boatyard, a low shed with a corrugated roof. The day was almost over. The sun was low in the sky.

When you were at school, did they really make you all confess your sins? said Alex. Jessica smiled the briefest smile and the young man laughed again. They followed the river into the old town where they were staying. He opened the door and, taking her hand, led her into the room. She took off her shoes and sat on the bed.

Why does everything always have to be such a joke with you? she said quietly.

In the evening they ate the bread they had bought that morning. Alex cut rough lumps of cheese with a penknife. They drank red wine that tasted of plastic out of flimsy beakers from the bathroom and, after they had eaten, Alex said,

Do you mind if I put on some music?

I don't care what you do, Jessica replied and turned away to brush the crumbs from the bed.

Have I done something wrong? said the young man a little later, but she did not reply.

The act of undressing in the bedroom when Alex was there was still quite new to Jessica. She was not sure she liked it. He lay propped up on the bed reading and glanced across at her from time to time. She undressed quietly and without fuss. She thought of the stale smell of changing rooms at school. When she lay down, Alex closed his book, reached out and began to smooth her hair with his hand.

Please, she said. *I can't stand anyone touching my hair. I've never liked it.* She took hold of his hand and placed it on her stomach. She lay beside him and scarcely breathed.

Jessica did not know when she had fallen asleep but when she awoke the music was not playing any more. Everything was the same except the moonlight. The room was filled with its white silence. She sat up and watched her breath rising like mist in the air and she felt, quite suddenly, that something had been set loose inside her head. She thought of Sister Connolly's room. *I'll teach you to pull girls' hair, shall I?* she was whispering, her breath hot, voice sharp as a blade. *We'll see how you like having your hair pulled, shall we?* and she remembered, as if it were yesterday, Sister Connolly fingering her hair, twisting it tight, so it left a bruise that no-one could see.

She turned and felt Alex's sleeping breath warm upon her neck. When he stirred she pushed him away, gently so he would not wake. She touched his dark hair with her outstretched palm. She twisted it between her fingers, just to see how it felt.

In the morning, Jessica plaited her hair to keep it out of the way. She rested her hands on her lap, one inside the other and waited for the day to begin. Though it was cooler, she wore the summer dress she had chosen before they left. Her legs were brown and pretty with the sun. Over breakfast she read out a page from the guide book and they agreed they would visit the medieval defences on the far side of the river.

They took the foot ferry to Polruan. When they had gone past the Blockhouse, Jessica leaned in close so her hip brushed against Alex's side. She wriggled her fingers into the warmth of his hand.

So I'm forgiven? said Alex.

Of course you are, she replied.

The road was steep and they climbed together, hand in hand. They were too breathless to say much. Jessica leaned forward and looked down at the road. At the top they passed the ruins of a church and

crossed the meadow to a rocky promontory on the edge of a cliff. There was mist far out over the sea. The sky was the colour of ash.

Alex walked to the edge and peered over.

Show off, called Jessica but he just laughed and did not move. He was standing on an outcrop of rock, facing her.

Double dare you? he said and beckoned her onto the rock. She could see the cliff edge behind him, the gulls wheeling in the air. There was a cormorant down on the rocks below, watching for fish.

Promise you won't push me? she laughed. *I'm not good with heights.* She edged forward and raised her hands to her throat. She drew her elbows together. Her little hands formed themselves into tight fists. He raised his hands too, to reach out and draw her gently towards him.

It's all right, he said, *I'll hold onto you. It's worth it for the view.* He placed his left hand on her shoulder, nestling his thumb into the delicate skin beneath her collar bone. He placed his right hand at the back of her head and, without thinking, pushed his fingers into her hair. She flinched and jerked her head away.

Get off, get off!

For a moment he did not react. She flung out her fists hard against his chest. He pulled his hands away quickly and took a step back in surprise.

Careful! she called but he was already stumbling back over the loose stones behind him. *Hold my hands!* she cried but when she reached out to where he had been, he had already gone.

There was the smallest human noise. For a few seconds, the shale and loose stones dropped down across the rough brown earth. Below there were trees and somewhere beyond, where she could not see, the river was still flowing.

There was no cry and no sound of movement or life at all.