

[1648 words]

Reflections on the Redrafting Process

In this essay I explore how I used the redrafting process to develop a narrative piece entitled 'Painting the Spare Room'. Generally, when writing a new piece, I start with a fragment of an idea (e.g., a bank heist using a narrowboat as a get-away), an object (e.g., a haunted house) or, as is the case here, characters that are desperate to resolve a problem. The initial idea can often be encapsulated in a simple sentence or paragraph, and is the first in a five-step writing process:

- Invention - the initial idea, theme or character
- Setting – placing the idea into a particular context
- Plotting – developing a timeline in which the characters' motivations and actions are revealed
- The first draft. The purpose of the first draft is simply to get from the beginning to the end of the piece, and to produce material that can then be worked on in later revision – perfection and precision are not critically important here
- Iterative analysis and revision. Each new draft seeks to be an improvement on its predecessor. If major rework was incorporated in the new draft, this may itself be the subject of later rework. Ultimately the goal is to produce a final draft that is the best it can possibly be.

Iterative re-examination and rewriting are at the heart of the process of revision.

Generally, I work using a top-down methodology. At the highest level, I consider whether the piece realizes my initial idea or theme, and whether my initial selection of narrative point of view serves the story well. Next, I look at the narrative structure, e.g., the sequencing and

contents of each scene and the use of flashbacks, flashforwards and foreshadowing. I examine whether the rising action, climax and falling action in each scene works well, whether the plot is driven forward by the characters' needs and their reactions to events and each other. At the next level I cut back, pare down and prune, trying to remove every superfluous word and I assess the remaining words to decide if they are the most appropriate for the effect intended. At the lowest level, I check grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalisation and formatting.

The initial idea for the piece discussed here came from looking at a 40 year old set of snaps from a student riding holiday. This then led me to formulate these goals:

- To depict how a relationship between a couple can change over time, driven by their changing circumstances and to explore that if lovers become friends could they then become long term lovers again?
- To draw on memories of my past riding holidays (Sinclair, 2020), using these to build sensory pictures which would increase the emotional engagement of the reader with the characters in the story (e.g. the blue costume).

I used conflicting points of view as suggested in Chapter 2 of *A Creative Writing Handbook* (ed. Neale, 2009, p. 17). I also took the advice in that chapter to use relationships under tension (ed. Neale, 2009, p. 19 – to add interest and drama to the piece; she is practical, pragmatic, career orientated – he is romantic, mildly incompetent and less successful.

As a warm-up I initially wrote a narrative poem (see Draft 1 on page 8), as I wanted to use a strong set of images based on colours, kingfishers and horses to pull the piece together and I felt most comfortable realizing those images in poetry. Since the emotional heart of the piece is in the conversations between the couples and their reflections on what they want from life I felt that poetry would provide a means of developing the lyrical and sensory images used in the story's setting before I worked on the emotional core of the piece that would be conveyed in characters' dialogue. I then used the advice on combining and genres in *A Creative Writing Handbook* (ed. Neale, 2009, p. 28) to revise the poem as narrative prose and use it for the opening scene of the second draft, and added a first pass at the conversations between the couple (see Draft 2 on page 9).

Having completed this second draft, I then set it aside for a period before reviewing it. This is a common redrafting technique, recommended by many writers, eg Neil Gaiman:

...once it's done, to put it away until you can read it with new eyes. ...When you're ready, pick it up and read it, as if you've never read it before. If there are things you aren't satisfied with as a reader, go in and fix them as a writer: that's revision. (2021, Neil Gaiman).

On re-reading the second draft, I felt the piece lacked emotional integrity. The needs and desires of the characters (particularly the woman) were not clearly expressed and did not drive the plot forward strongly enough - their decision to get back together again seemed rather arbitrary. This led me to substantially redraft the piece, expanding it from 1500 to 2700 words,

by adding additional dialogue, and to give equal balance in trying to reveal both characters' internal feelings. I was aware at this point that much of the dialogue was now too flabby and would need tightening up, but I was happy to leave this pruning to a later revision – my goal for this particular draft being to improve the overall narrative structure and the believability of the character's interactions. This resulted in a new draft (see Draft 3 on page 15) which I shared with my colleagues in the Novel Writing course group, and who kindly provided the following feedback:

Good points:

- Some effective descriptive writing of the riding scenes
- Good use of colour themes, and the use of blue to knit the story together
- Good use of humour - (the goose)
- Good shape to the story (the couple did move forward in the piece and apparently came to a decision for their future)

Areas needing attention:

- Too much dialogue and not enough description of the internal thoughts of the characters
- Too much focus on the man, the woman remained a bit of a cipher, too opaque, a bit too cold and clinical to be realistic. (The original idea was to write this piece exclusively from the man's viewpoint, on the basis that he does not really understand women, and therefore the reader should not be given any direct access to the woman's thoughts, but on reflection I think this was perhaps a mistake, and certainly rather hard to pull off).

- Lack of clarity about the backstory of the characters. In this third draft I was trying to avoid having a truly omniscient narrator who could tell the reader directly what was going on as this seemed a bit of any easy way out, but on reflection a small proportion of omniscience is necessary, otherwise it would be very hard to provide information about what happened to the characters in the past.
- The flashback inside the flashback may be too complex a formal structure for this simple story.
- The prose needs to be tightened up significantly. The opening descriptive paragraph should be shortened slightly, and the paragraph at the end with the ‘Chalk and Cheese’ comments could perhaps be dropped entirely. Lots of other minor cuts would make the piece more effective.

With the objective of addressing these concerns, I produced a fourth draft (see Draft 4 on page 27). However, after setting this aside for a period and then re-reading the piece afresh I still felt that significant revision was still necessary. I felt that the leitmotifs of kingfisher and horse pairs were now effective similes for the pragmatic family relationship that the couple would choose for the future, but the plot still was not adequately character driven, as a lot of the backstory of the couple was still being revealed in a rather static manner and some of the dialogue was still rather stilted. I therefore decided to do a further major revision and realise the piece as a radio drama script (see Draft 5 on page 37). My reasoning was that radio is the most direct media to show the audience what each character is actually thinking through their dialogue. This suits the intended intimate nature of the piece. As Jane Rogers suggests (2008, Track 5), radio allows ‘you to go into a person’s head – you can hear their thoughts – it’s

incredibly intimate'. Using a radio script forced me to live in each characters' head without the prop of external prose. I felt this approach made me produce much more realistic and effective dialogue in the fifth draft.

This brings us to the present day. My next revision will import the dialogue from the radio script back into the prose version. I hope this will finally result in version of the piece that depicts the true nature of the development of the couple's relationship, although I would not discount further subsequent revisions.

What key lessons have I learnt about revision? Early drafts should be allowed to expand, as I explore the nature of the characters, their motivations and the themes of the piece, while later drafts should focus on pruning, cutting, tightening the prose to ruthlessly remove redundancy. No idea, phrase, scene or character should be so precious to me as author, that it cannot be removed if it does not interest or enchant the reader. This is William Faulkner's principle of

In writing, you must kill all your darlings. (Faulkner, cited in Reid, 2019).

Fresh eyes too, (whether my own or supportive readers), are invaluable when reviewing a draft. Most importantly, I have learnt that while construction may take a lot of effort, a substantially larger effort must be used in subsequent reconstruction and refinement. As Nabakov said:

I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers. (Nabavok, 1966, cited in Temple, 2013)

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Drafts

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Draft 1

The girl in the blue costume

Blue. So many blues.

That's what he remembered.

Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky
that quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the moor,
nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as they bathed in the valley stream,
washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies.

No, it was the deep azure of her costume and the silvery cobalt shadows in her hair.

It was the dark cherry blue of the bruise on her thigh
where she had cantered under an unseen bough.

And the cornflower blue of her irises,
with their little flecks of steely blue determination -
these prizes he held fast in his memory.

Those, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen,
flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water,
a thrilling, ephemeral moment of companionship.

Now, so many years later, the viridian and emerald greens,
the burnt umbers and siennas have all now faded into distant greys -
but still the blues remain.

Draft 2

Painting the Spare Room

Blue. So many blues. That's what he remembered. Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky that quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the moor, nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as they bathed in the valley stream, washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies. No, it was the deep azure blue of her costume and the silvery cobalt shadows in her hair that remained as burnished prizes in his memory. The dark cherry blue of the bruises on her right thigh, where she had cantered under an unseen oak bough and the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of steely blue determination. Those, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen earlier, flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water, a thrilling, ephemeral moment of colour. They had ridden many times across the moors, and deep amongst the valley woods and streams – the viridian and emerald greens, the burnt umbers and siennas have all now faded into distant greys – but so many years later, only the blues, so many blues, still remain.

‘What will it be then – the usual dry white?’ he asked.

‘Yes, please.’

She had taken her duffel coat off and was sitting on a bench next to the fire. When he brought the drinks there was no table to put them on so she held them, wine and bitter in each hand, while he took his coat off. As he sat down next to her, he leant across and kissed her on the lips. Not a peck, but not a full snog either. She did not resist, but she did not turn away either. He thought maybe he saw her cheeks flush, or perhaps it was the fire.

‘What was that for?’ she said.

‘Was that a bad thing to do?’

‘Maybe. Just unexpected.’

‘It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly wonderful blue.’

‘It’s just M&S. Hardly Versace. You always see me wearing M&S.’

‘Yes, but that’s when we meet after work. You’ve been seeing your clients. They like to see you in something posh but recognisable – but not too expensive – it reassures them you are part of the establishment. A male consultant wears a three-piece suit. A woman wears M&S. It’s like a uniform – a badge of office – I don’t see you in a swimming costume – it was ... it was sublime’.

‘A good job you don’t normally see me in a cozzie – that would hardly blend in in Regent’s Street. Anyway, I also wear Primark and Next to work, so you’re not really making a convincing argument – and you’re getting off the point – why did you kiss me, just then – it was unsettling – not something I was expecting.’

‘I’ve kissed you before....’

‘But that was then, and this is now. Then we were students – we did all sorts things – but things change, now we are friends. I don’t think you can ever go backwards, once you are friends.’

‘So, is that how it works? – the clockwork runs down, the library ticket expires? The passion subsides never to be seen again. The universe starts with a big bang and ends with a whimper’.

‘Well you’re the scientist – you know the theories....’.

‘Yes, but that’s it exactly. That’s how science works, not how we work – I don’t see why we should be bound by Newton and Einstein – we can make whatever choices we like. And I chose to kiss you because, when we swam this evening and I saw you in that costume it was like the clock had been wound up again and was ready to run once more.’

‘So, you think we could go back?’

‘No, probably not – but why couldn’t we go forward in a different way – why don’t you move in again?’

‘What? Well, that came out of the blue!’

‘Well, yes it did in a sort of way.’

She was silent.

‘Do you think it would be more sensible to have sex, before moving in?’ she said.

‘Well, we used to have sex – and I seem to recall it was pretty good – at least initially. Surely, we don’t need to have another driving test – I don’t think the license expires for that sort of thing – we just haven’t used it for a while. It’s like riding a bicycle – or roller skating – you don’t forget once you’ve got the hang of it.’

‘You’re muddling up your metaphors, as usual. I know we did have sex. But then we stopped. Or rather you stopped. And then when you’re sharing the same flat and you’re not having sex, but then you’re no different from any other couple of people that are friends – so you might as well not be in the same bed. Or even in the same flat. And then once you are only friends, then one friend moves out. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your life, they become just like all the tens or hundreds of other people in

your life. And then why do you need to be in the same bed or even same flat with them at all once the clock has run down?’

It was his turn to be silent, for a moment.

‘You know it wasn’t really just me that stopped the sex,’ he said.

‘How do you mean – I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. You were too as I recall initially.’

‘Yes, now that you mention it, I remember that. But it wasn’t really the physical stuff – it was when I gave you flowers and you didn’t like the showiness of it, or when I held your hand in the street, or when I made you that running horse necklace. I never quite knew how to show – well, you know.... Then you got your consultant position and then you were a partner and I was still stuck trying to sow some seeds of knowledge in the Peckham’s teenagers– it would be easier to dam the Red Sea and irrigate the Sahara than teach them maths. Now you go to work in Prada, I go in jeans.’

They were both silent now.

‘I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming,’ he said

‘Yes, I saw them too.’

‘They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just downstream of the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their lives depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?’

‘I don’t think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can’t see any, then they fly to another perch and look again. They don’t plan, they just act. Fish, nest, raise their young. They don’t need to know why – they just are – well, what they are – they are just kingfishers – and probably are all the happier for that simple fact. They were blue too. I envied them their total absorption in the moment.’

‘Can I kiss you again?’

‘All right.’

The following morning, he was up first, fetching their horses in from the field, pulling their rugs, brushing the mud from their legs and tails. He led the horses up the lane to the campsite and brought a morning feed out of the barn. Hers, a chestnut gelding, its coat still slightly steaming from his vigorous brushing and rubbing down – showed an iridescence of subtle mixes of dark reds, browns and coppers as it glinted in the early morning sun. His, a skewbald Welsh cob, a riot of patches of brown and white, its rough, thick coat.

‘Chalk and cheese,’ he muttered, ‘That’s what we should call them – just like us.’

The horses were actually called Sarah and Fred. Not that they knew or cared; they were simply content to munch on their hay in companionable horsey silence, living in the moment, as they had always done.

She was cooking bacon and eggs as he came up to the tent.

‘So, were we wrong about the friendship theory last night?’ he said.

‘Seems like it.’

‘I think I’ll paint the spare room blue then, when we get back.’

‘Or pink,’ she replied.

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(1444 words)

Draft 3

Painting the Spare Room

Blue. So many blues. That's what he remembered. Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky that quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the moor, nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as they bathed in the valley stream, washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies. [A1] No, it was the deep azure blue [A2] of her costume, the silvery cobalt [A3] shadows in her hair ~~that~~, the dark cherry blue of the bruises on her right thigh, where she had cantered under an unseen ~~oak~~ bough [A4] earlier and the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of steely blue determination that remained as burnished prizes in his memory. -Those, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen earlier, flashing and flaunting their ~~sapphiressapphiresbluessapphires~~ and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water, a thrilling, ephemeral moment [A5] ~~of colour~~. They had ridden many times across the moors, and deep amongst the valley woods and streams – the viridian and emerald greens, the burnt umbers and siennas had all now faded into distant greys – but so many years later, only the blues, so many blues remain. [A6]

Each day in their long weekend had the same simple rhythm. [A7] Early morning, fetch the horses in from the field, groom, tack, then ride into the afternoon, until their limbs [A8] shoulders ached and their thighs and calves were numb. -Then horses brushed, fed and watered, rugged and turned out in their field, a swim if they had the energy, then the pub [A9]. Repeat three times then back to the complexity of life in the city [A10].

'What will it be then – a dry white?' he asked.

'Yes, please.' [A11]

He hadn't really needed to ask. Like all couples they had built up a database of preferences and foibles, knowledge hard won over the years of the relationship. At first there had been secrets and surprises, revelations to be deliciously discovered, and then as time went on, a stability, a reference book of behaviour, comfortably repeated in each other's presence. Now, they were simply riding companions, their initial passion and intimacy not forgotten, but conveniently shelved.

She had taken her duffel coat off and was sitting on a bench next to the fire, when he brought the drinks. There was no table to put them on, so she took them, wine and bitter in each hand, while he took his coat off. As he sat down next to her, and she still had her hands full of glasses, he lent across and kissed her. She did not pull away, but she did not respond either. He thought maybe he saw her cheeks flush, or perhaps it was just the fire.

'What was that for?' she said.

'Was that a bad thing to do?'

'Just unexpected. Maybe even surprising.'

'Maybe I should surprise you more.'

'Maybe you should.'

He felt he had said something, or done something important, but he could not decide what. The kiss was something, but there was something more. He thought he could taste candy floss in the brief kiss, sweet, but melted and gone as soon as it reached your tongue. his tongue.

He realised she was still looking at him, waiting.

'It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.'

‘What?’

‘I don’t know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly, wonderfully blue.’^[A28]

‘Well, it’s a good job I don’t wear my cossie back in London, then. Might cause a bit of problem wearing it in Camden High Street if it has that effect.’^[A29]

He did not want to smile at the image, but he could not resis itt^[A30]resist it. He needed to be serious though, to somehow convince her, things had changed, and the past did not have to define their future. Maybe that was the something.

‘Yes,’ he said, and then was silent, still unsure what to say. In truth, he was a bit surprised he had kissed her too. ^[A31]The idea been in his mind for a while, even before they had started their long weekend. But then a kiss was ^[A32]easy message, there and gone in th-the moment. Putting something into words, that needed a lot more effort.

‘I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming,’ he said, but then was stuck.^[A33]

He thought back to the afternoon, when they had walked the horses in single -file along the bridlepaths that wound through the woods at the river’s edge. ^[A34]She was leading, as she always did. He followed, admiring the curve of her shoulder, watching the gentle sway of her body, as it moved in harmony with the horse’s gait^[A35]^{[A36].} He had realised then he still wanted her, just as much as he had the first time they had come to^[A37] ride those paths. They were both new to university then – she a medic, he hedging his bets with a geographygeographygeographygeographygeographyliberal artsgeography degree^[A38]^[A39]^[A40] and science course.a notion to become a teacher.^[A41] They had come in a group of a dozen largely insolvent students, loftily calling themselves the University Riding Club’s Official Easter tour,

underwriting the cost from the University's Social Club's coffers with some traditionally dubious student accounting. ^[A42]Even then, theyThey had to borrow tents from the University Officer Training Corps and had ~~wangled~~ a special rate from the local ~~farm cum riding~~ stables as one of the group was ~~conveniently~~ going out with the farmer's daughter. The weekend had been quite a success until the moment he had thought ~~totototoit would be fun to see what would happen if he encouraged~~ to encourage one of the farmer's geese into the girls' tent. There was a gratifying burst of frantic honking, hissing and barking from the goose. But then he realised he had not fully thought the plan through. An equally ~~loudloudloudloudloudloadloud~~ squeal followedfollowedfollowedfollowedfollowed~~came from~~ followed the tent:^[A43]honking:

“Where did that bloody goose come from? That bastard has shit all over my sleeping bag!”

He He~~Well, thatHe was~~carefulcareful*a bit unfortunate, he thought*careful to himself, *a bit unlucky really – it should have been okay – a one in six chance with six girls in the tent – hard luck it happened to be her sleeping bag*^[A44]. He keptkeep a low profile for a day or so. It was only on the last afternoon that he managed to ask her if she would like to go for a drink when they got back to college. He was ~~pleasantly~~ ^[A45]surprised when she said yes. But then, he told himself, ~~he had hardly expected~~ the goose ~~was hardly likely~~ to grass him up. ^[A46]Still smiling, he was ~~abruptly~~ brought back to the present...~~as he realised she.~~ She was waiting for an answer.

——— ~~‘It wasn’t that funny – the Camden bit. And I’m not sure the kiss was funny either...’~~, she had said.———

‘What – sorry, say that again?’, he said.

‘Why did you kiss me, just then?—it was unsettling— not something I was expecting.?’^[A47]

‘~~Shouldn’t I have? I’ve kissed you before....lots of times. Didn’t it remind you?~~’

‘~~But that was then, and this is now. Then~~‘It was unsettling - I thought we were justjustjustjustjuststudents—we did all sorts things—but things change—now we arejust friends, and I don’t expect the unexpected now...kissing was something from friends.’^[A48]

‘So, is that how it works?’, he said. ‘the past and I’m not sure you can ever go back. The clockwork runs down, the library ticket expires? The passion subsides clock never stopsstopsstopsstopsstopstøstops ticking and ^[A49]we can’t be studentsstudentsstudentsstudentsstudentsseenstudents again. The universe starts with a big bang and ends with a whimper.’

‘No, of course not. But
‘Do you really believe that?reallycan’t say we are machines....’

‘Yes, exactly’, he said, ‘We aren’t machines’. Somehow his argument was turning inside out, but he did not mindreally believe that? he was not making logical sense. The words he wanted were finally forming in his mind. ‘We? I think we can make whatever choices we like. And I chose to kiss you because, when we swam this evening and I saw you in that costume it was like the clock had been wound back up again—and was ready to run again.’^[A50]

Needing a moment to think,She wished she had not mentioned clocks. *Maybe, she thought, you can wind the clock spring up, but you can never move the hands backwards. Or that’s how my biological clock works.* ^{[A51][A52]}. She shivered, despite the warmth of the fire and said,—

‘Do you want to see what’s happened to the food? And maybe another round? Here, take it out of this,’ ~~as~~and ~~as~~ she rummaged in her ~~duffel coat for her purse~~ for the money.

‘I’d really like you to take this on your trip’, he said, as he gave her a small, neatly wrapped package.

‘Thank you – how cute – such tiny elephants’, she said, as she slowly removed the wrappings to reveal a small red, leather box. A small jewellery box. ~~AAAAA~~~~Maybe a~~ watch, she thought. ~~Or maybe some jewellery.~~^[A66] *Or perhaps something less practical, more romantic, even reckless and ill-judged....*

‘Oh, I really don’t think...’, she said, ~~wondering how to finish the sentence but then and then stopped as~~ he took the box out of her hands and opened it to reveal a small brass compass.

~~‘I think you’ll find this useful at some point’, he said.~~ ‘Just keep going south – if you start seeing penguins then you’ve gone too far.’

~~She felt lightheaded for a moment, pleased that he had chosen something useful, something that was not obviously personal, and certainly nothing romantic.~~

‘That is such a nice thing, so thoughtful, and, well, so really nice’, she said. She put her arms around him and gave him a squeeze, ready to accept a kiss. But as she closed her eyes and waited, he pulled away.

‘I can’t believe it’, he said. ‘Look, the wretched thing is broken! North is that way, but the needle is pointing the other way’.

‘I don’t understand’, she said.^[A67]

‘They’ve screwed it up - painted the wrong end of the needle red’, he replied. ~~He~~^{He} wanted ~~herherherherher~~^{you so much} her to carry it, and ~~maybe~~ think of me ~~perhaps it would even guide you back someday.~~ ^{him.} But ~~it it’s no use now.~~ ^{it was useless.}

She said something like it didn’t matter really – it was ~~aaaa~~^{just} a kind ~~that he had thought,~~ ^{of a present at all,} ~~but~~ he did not need to give her a present at all, really.

He looked at her for a moment and then slowly reached into his pocket, saying

‘Well, actually, that was not my first choice – I did have an alternative and, er....’

At this point he gave her a very similar sized box, again wrapped in elephant paper.

‘Wow, that was good contingency planning then’, she said, trying to lighten the tone and knowing that he would be pleased that she recognised the effort he had put into making sure he gave her a memento^[A68].

‘What is it?’

Maybe another survival aid, she thought, or maybe a Swiss Army knife perhaps, or a portable mosquito net, that would be useful, or She stopped abruptly when she saw it was a ring....

‘Oh. I’m sorry...,’ was all she could say^[A69]^[A70]^[A71]

He brought the second round of drinks just as their food arrived. They ate in silence for a while.^[A72]

‘So, you think we ~~shouldshouldshouldshouldshouldcouldshould~~ go back?’ she said.

‘No, but I don’t actually want to go back, even if we could. –Would you? If I’m honest, it was all a bit puzzling then. I was just living in the moment. ^[A73] I don’t think, looking back I ever quite knew what was happening, I mean, how serious was it? What did you want? Indeed, what did I want^[A74]? You were right when you said that was then, and this is now. Why can’t just start from here, in this moment, and simply go forward from now?’^[A75]

He was right, she thought. They had been comfortable together. But had it just been simply a moment in time?^[A76]

‘But I don’t want to stop being friends. I want to be friends and something more than that. Look, why don’t you move in again?’

‘What? Well, that came out of the blue!’ Then, she was silent, for a moment, before she said:

‘Why did we stop having sex, do you think?’^[A77]

Wow, that came out of the blue, too, he thought^[A78].

‘Well, you didn’t have that blue swimsuit then’, he said. He realised ~~hehehehehe~~^{the} was ~~him~~ now the one that was skirting the issue.....~~unsure what to say.~~ But she said it for him:

‘Actually, it was more you than me that stopped it. I think it just gradually faded away. And then when you’re sharing the same flat and you’re not having sex, then you’re no different from any other couple of people that are friends. At that point, you might as well not be in the same bed. Or even in the same flat. And then once you are only friends, then one friend moves out. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the ^[A79]one special person in your life, they become just like the hundreds of other people in your life.’

‘You know it wasn’t really just me that stopped the sex. Not really,’ ~~hehehehehe~~^{she} said.

———‘~~How do you mean~~—’ ‘I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. -You were too as I recall ~~initially.~~’

‘Yes, I do remember that. But it wasn’t really the physical stuff that I started worrying about – it was when you gave me flowers and I didn’t like the showiness of it, or when we held ~~handshandshandshands~~ ^{hands} ~~shands~~ in the street, or when you gave me that running horse necklace. I don’t think I wanted that sort of relationship ^{then}^[A80].’

‘I never quite knew how to show – well, you know.... Then you got registrar and I was still stuck trying to educate the uncouth youth sow some seeds of knowledge in the loutish teens in Peckham^[A81] – I felt it ~~was~~ would have been easier to dam the Red Sea and irrigate the Sahara than teach them maths. Now was all a bit pointless, while you were off saving lives. And now you go to work in Prada, I go in jeans.’^{[A82][A83]}

They were both silent now.

‘I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming,’ he said, eventually.^[A84]

‘Yes, I saw them too.’

‘They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just downstream of the big oak^[A85]. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their life depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?’

‘I don’t think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can’t see any, then they fly to another perch and look again. ~~They don’t plan, they just act.~~ Fish, nest, raise their young. ~~They They They They They They~~ don’t need to know why – they just are – well, what they are – they are just a kingfisher – and probably are all the happier for that simple fact^[A86]. They were blue too. happy, responding just in the moment. I envied them, ~~their total absorption in the moment.~~’

They were both silent for a moment^[A87]. . .

He, in his thoughts thinking^[A88]: *We really could do it this time – I’m sure I can turn up the ‘surprise’ volume – but what sort of surprise? Maybe breakfast in bed? Or maybe I should chuck it in at Peckham, that would be pretty surprising.*

She was thinking: *Maybe the clock has almost run down, I'm 35 now, more than half of my eggs have gone, and that clock spring can't be wound up again*.^[A89]

'Can I kiss you again?'

'All right.'^[A90]

And so he did.

'You know, I've never told you, but that was me with the goose in the tent.'

'I know', she said.^{[A91][A92][A93]}

The following morning, he was up first, fetching their horses in from the field, pulling their rugs, brushing the mud from their legs and tails.^[A94] He led the horses up the lane to the campsite and brought a morning feed out of the barn. —Hers, a chestnut gelding, its coat still slightly steaming from his vigorous brushing and rubbing down — it showed an iridescence of subtle mixes of dark reds, browns and coppers^[A95] and as it glistened in the early morning sun. His, a skewbald Welsh cob, a riot of patches of brown and white, its rough, thick coat.^[A96]

'Chalk and cheese,' he muttered, 'That's what we should call them. —. But they'd be just as contented whatever we called them'^[A97].^[A98]

She was cooking bacon and eggs as he came up to the tent.

——— 'So, were we wrong about the friendship theory last night?' he said.

——— 'Seems like it'.

'I think I'll paint the spare room blue then, when we get back.....'^[A99] he said.

'Or maybe pink', she replied^{[A99][A100]}.

(2784 words, and 3 packets of McVities chocolate biscuits)^[A101]

I'm sorry Dave but it still isn't really working for me. I don't understand why this woman is with this man? The reader has no clue (apart from the first 'flush which might be from the fire') about how she feels about this situation.

What have they been doing for the last 10 -15 years?

Has either had multiple failed relationships? Or a big love that broke down?

Has she been too busy to have any relationships?

Is she autistic and that's why she shows no feelings – in which case why does she want to have kids?

What about him – has she encouraged him at all?

Have they talked about the fact that they go riding together a lot, is one keener than the other?

Does she agree to it under duress? Or is she just using him for the horses/riding?

She mentions her biological clock, and that's it, she decides in a day to move in with someone she appears to have no feelings for, or relationship with, at all? It just seems odd. And FYI the current trend for female doctors who reach 35 with no partner is to have their eggs frozen – I kid you not. And actually, quite a lot of women remain single rather than 'make do', I have a number of female doctor friends who have done exactly this (and who are still looking for 'Mr Right' in their 40's)

Also most couples talk about what has been going on in their lives, even friends would talk a little about their relationships with other people?

We discussed their emotional ineptitude. Maybe you could show that more by showing what the man is thinking – how does he think that love and relationships work? And as the author, although you may not put on the page what she is thinking, you need to know what she is thinking, ie how she thinks that love and relationships work so that you know what her responses to him would be and you can show them through how she acts?

(2700 words)[A102][A103][A104]

Draft 4

Painting the Spare Room

Blue. So many blues. That's what he remembered. Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky that quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the moor, nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as they bathed in the valley stream, washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies. No, it was the azure blue of her costume, the cobalt shadows in her hair, the dark cherry blue of the bruises on her right thigh where she had cantered under an unseen bough earlier and the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of steely blue determination that remained as burnished prizes in his memory. Those, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen earlier, flashing and flaunting their sapphires and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water, a thrilling, ephemeral moment. They had ridden many times across the moors, and deep amongst the valley woods and streams – the viridian and emerald greens, the burnt umbers and siennas had all now faded into distant greys – but so many years later, only the blues, so many blues remain.

Each day in their long weekend had the same simple rhythm. Early morning, fetch the horses in from the field, groom, tack, then ride into the afternoon, until their shoulders ached and their thighs and calves were numb. Then horses brushed, fed and watered, rugged and turned out in their field, a swim if they had the energy, then the pub. Repeat three times then back to the complexity of life in the city.

‘What will it be then – a dry white?’

He hadn't really needed to ask. Like all couples they had built up a database of preferences and foibles, knowledge hard won over the years of the relationship. At first there had been secrets and surprises, revelations to be deliciously discovered, and then as time went

on, a stability, a reference book of behaviour, comfortably repeated in each other's presence. Now, they were simply riding companions, their initial passion and intimacy not forgotten, but conveniently shelved.

She had taken her duffel coat off and was sitting on a bench next to the fire. There was no table to put them on, so she took the glasses, while he took his coat off. As he sat down next to her, and she still had her hands full of glasses, he lent across and kissed her. She did not pull away, but she did not respond either. He thought maybe he saw her cheeks flush, or perhaps it was just the fire.

'What was that for?' she said.

'Was that a bad thing to do?'

'Just unexpected. Maybe even surprising.'

'Maybe I should surprise you more.'

'Maybe you should.'

He felt he had said something, or done something important, but he could not decide what. The kiss was something, but there was something more. He thought he could taste candy floss, sweet, but melted and gone as soon as it reached his tongue.

He realised she was still looking at him, waiting.

'It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.'

'What?'

'I don't know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly, wonderfully blue.'

'Well, it's a good job I don't wear my cossie back in London, then. Might cause a bit of problem wearing it in Camden High Street if it has that effect.'

He did not want to smile at the image, but he could not resist it. He needed to be serious though, to somehow convince her, things had changed, and the past did not have to define their future. Maybe that was the something.

‘Yes,’ he said, and then was silent, still unsure what to say. In truth, he was a bit surprised he had kissed her too. The idea been in his mind for a while, even before they had started their long weekend. But then a kiss was an easy message, there and gone in the moment. Putting something into words, that needed a lot more effort.

‘I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming,’ he said. Then, unsure what he meant, he stopped.

He thought back to the afternoon, when they had walked the horses in single file along the bridlepaths that wound through the woods at the river’s edge. She was leading, as she always did. He followed, admiring the curve of her shoulder, watching the gentle sway of her body, as it moved in harmony with the horse’s gait. He had realised then he still wanted her, just as much as he had the first time they rode those paths. They were both new to university then – she a medic, he hedging his bets with an easy geography degree and a notion to become a teacher. They had come in a group of a dozen largely insolvent students, loftily calling themselves the University Riding Club’s Official Easter tour, underwriting the cost from the University’s Social Club’s coffers with some traditionally dubious student accounting. They had to borrow tents from the University Officer Training Corps and had a special rate from the local stables as one of the group was going out with the farmer’s daughter. The weekend had been quite a success until the moment he had thought to encourage one of the farmer’s geese into the girls’ tent. There was a gratifying burst of frantic honking, hissing and barking from the goose. But then he realised he had not fully thought the plan through. An equally loud squeal followed the honking:

“Where did that bloody goose come from? That bastard has shit all over my sleeping bag!”

He was careful to keep a low profile for a day or so. It was only on the last afternoon that he managed to ask her if she would like to go for a drink when they got back to college. He was surprised when she said yes. But then, he told himself, the goose was hardly likely to grass him up. Still smiling, he was brought back to the present. She was waiting for an answer.

‘What – sorry, say that again?’, he said.

‘Why did you kiss me, just then?’

‘Shouldn’t I have? I’ve kissed you lots of times. Didn’t it remind you?’

‘It was unsettling - I thought we were just friends now...kissing was something from the past and I’m not sure you can ever go back. The clock never stops ticking, we can’t be students again.’

‘Do you really believe that? I think we can make whatever choices we like. And I chose to kiss you because, when we swam this evening and I saw you in that costume it was like the clock had been wound back up and was ready to run again.’

She wished she had not mentioned clocks. *Maybe, she thought, you can wind the clock spring up, but you can never move the hands backwards. Or that’s how my biological clock works.* She shivered, despite the warmth of the fire and said:

‘Do you want to see what’s happened to the food? And maybe another round? Here, take it out of this,’ as she rummaged in her purse for the money.

While he was fetching the drinks, she let her thoughts drift back to the end of their last year at University. That was four years after their first trip to the moors. They had been sharing a flat for a couple of years by then – well more of a large bedsit. The first year they found time

for what they called their ‘pasta and passion’ evenings, drinking cheap Italian wine in the Mille Pine and walking home to share a bed. As time went on, they gradually fell into a comfortable, companionable, efficient partnership - studying together, sharing a sausage casserole, increasingly sober as final exams approached. Now, their courses were over, she had arranged a six month WHO placement in Tanzania, and he had just finished his teaching certificate, so they planned a going away celebration. She had enjoyed the convenience of those eighteen months, but she was ready to move on. He would be a teacher in some secondary school somewhere, she would be a junior doctor in a hospital in a different city. It seemed a tidy endpoint to her. After her time in Africa, she expected that if they did meet in future, then they would simply meet as friends. No need for a messy break up, just let the embers gradually die.

The evening had started well. The Mille Pine provided its ever-reliable menu, as it had done throughout their student days: tonno con fagioli, cannelloni or spaghetti alla vongole, zabaglione. Perhaps too much wine. Certainly too much honesty. If only he hadn’t given her that present.

‘I’d really like you to take this on your trip’, he said, as he gave her a small, neatly wrapped package.

‘Thank you – how cute – such tiny elephants’, she said, as she slowly removed the wrappings to reveal a small red, leather box. A small jewellery box. *A watch*, she thought. *Or some jewellery. Or perhaps something less practical, more romantic, even reckless and ill-judged....*

‘Oh, I really don’t think....’, she said and then stopped as he took the box out of her hands and opened it to reveal a small brass compass.

‘Just keep going south – if you start seeing penguins then you’ve gone too far.’

‘That is such a nice thing, so thoughtful, and, well, so really nice’, she said. She put her arms around him and gave him a squeeze, ready to accept a kiss. But as she closed her eyes and waited, he pulled away.

‘I can’t believe it’, he said. ‘Look, the wretched thing is broken! North is that way, but the needle is pointing the other way’.

‘I don’t understand’, she said.

‘They’ve screwed it up - painted the wrong end of the needle red’, he replied. He wanted her to carry it and think of him. But it was useless.

She said something like it didn’t matter really – it was a kind thought, but he did not need to give her a present at all, really.

He looked at her for a moment and then slowly reached into his pocket, saying

‘Well, actually, that was not my first choice – I did have an alternative and, er....’

At this point he gave her a very similar sized box, again wrapped in elephant paper.

‘Wow, that was good contingency planning then’, she said, trying to lighten the tone and knowing that he would be pleased that she recognised his effort.

‘What is it?’

Maybe another survival aid, she thought, or maybe a Swiss Army knife perhaps, or a portable mosquito net, that would be useful, or

‘Oh. I’m sorry....,’ was all she could say as she gave him back the ring.

He brought the second round of drinks just as their food arrived. They ate in silence for a while.

‘So, you think we should go back?’, she said.

‘No, but I don’t actually want to go back, even if we could. Would you? If I’m honest, it was all a bit puzzling then. I don’t think, looking back I ever quite knew what was happening, I mean, how serious was it? What did you want? Indeed, what did I want? You were right when you said that was then, and this is now. Why can’t just start from here, in this moment, and simply go forward from now?’

He was right, she thought. They had been comfortable together. But had it just been simply a moment in time?

‘But I don’t want to stop being friends. I want to be friends and something more than that. Look, why don’t you move in again?’

‘What? Well, that came out of the blue!’ Then, she was silent, for a moment, before she said:

‘Why did we stop having sex, do you think?’

Wow, that came out of the blue, too, he thought.

‘Well, you didn’t have that blue swimsuit then’, he said. He realised he was now the one that was skirting the issue. But she said it for him:

‘Actually, it was more you than me that stopped it. I think it just gradually faded away. And then when you’re sharing the same flat and you’re not having sex, then you’re no different from any other couple of people that are friends. At that point, you might as well not be in the same bed. Or even in the same flat. And then once you are only friends, then one friend moves out. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your life, they become just like the hundreds of other people in your life.’

‘You know it wasn’t really just me that stopped the sex. Not really,’ he said. ‘I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. You were too as I recall.’

‘Yes, I do remember that. But it wasn’t really the physical stuff that I started worrying about – it was when you gave me flowers and I didn’t like the showiness of it, or when we held hands in the street, or when you gave me that running horse necklace. I don’t think I wanted that sort of relationship then.’

‘I never quite knew how to show – well, you know.... Then you got registrar and I was still stuck trying to educate the uncouth youth of Peckham – I felt it was all a bit pointless, while you were off saving lives. And now you go to work in Prada, I go in jeans.’

They were both silent now.

‘I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming,’ he said, eventually.

‘Yes, I saw them too.’

‘They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just downstream of the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their life depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?’

‘I don’t think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can’t see any, then they fly to another perch and look again. Fish, nest, raise their young. They just are – well, what they are – happy, responding just in the moment. I envied them.’

They were both silent again.

He, in his thoughts was thinking:

We really could do it this time – I'm sure I can turn up the 'surprise' volume – but what sort of surprise? Maybe breakfast in bed? Or maybe I should chuck it in at Peckham, that would be pretty surprising.

She was thinking:

Maybe the clock has almost run down, I'm 35 now, more than half of my eggs have gone, and that clock spring can't be wound up again'.

'Can I kiss you again?'

'All right.'

And so he did.

'You know, I've never told you, but that was me with the goose in the tent.'

'I know', she said.

The following morning, he was up first, fetching their horses in from the field, pulling their rugs, brushing the mud from their legs and tails. He led the horses up the lane to the campsite and brought a morning feed out of the barn. Hers, a chestnut gelding, its coat still slightly steaming from his vigorous brushing and rubbing down – it showed an iridescence of subtle mixes of dark reds, browns and coppers and as it glinted in the early morning sun. His, a skewbald Welsh cob, a riot of patches of brown and white, its rough, thick coat.

'Chalk and cheese,' he muttered, 'That's what we should call them.'

She was cooking bacon and eggs as he came up to the tent.

'I think I'll paint the spare room blue then, when we get back,' he said.

'Or maybe pink', she replied.

(2692 words)

Draft 5

Painting the Spare Room

By

David Sinclair

A Play for Radio

CHARACTERS

MAN (mid 30s) geography teacher

WOMAN (mid 30s) NHS registrar

BARMAN

Set in the present, during a horse-riding weekend on Exmoor.

Running Time: 14 mins 55 seconds

MAN:

(NARRATING)

So many blues.

That's what he remembered.

Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky

That quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the
moor,

Nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as
they bathed in the valley stream,

Washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume
of horse from their bodies.

No, it was the deep azure of her costume and the silvery
cobalt shadows in her hair.

It was the dark cherry blue of the bruise on her thigh where
she had cantered under an unseen bough.

And the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of
steely blue determination -

These prizes he held fast in his memory.

These, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen,

Flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they
swooped and dipped over the water.

A thrilling, ephemeral moment of companionship.

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB

FADE UP

INT: MID EVENING MEAL SERVICE IS IN
FULL SWING

MAN: A large dry white wine and a pint of Exmoor Ale please. And can I order some food too? Haven't eaten since breakfast – could eat a horse. Figuratively of course.

BARMAN: Certainly sir, what would you like?

MAN: I'm going to have a steak pie and chips. (TO WOMAN) Do you want the same?

WOMAN: Yes. Why break the habit? I think I've had steak pie every time we've come here in the last five years.

MAN: (TO BARMAN). Here, can you put it on this card?

WOMAN: That's why I like this weekend. It's always the same: Early morning, fetch the horses in from the field, groom, tack, then ride until we're knackered. Brush the horses, feed and water, then rug them and turn them out in their field. No unexpected excitements, no emails, no interruptions. Comfortable predictability.

MAN: Yes, a good cowboy looks after the horses first.

WOMAN: Then swim in the river, and brush and rug ourselves up and then the pub. We are just creatures of habit.

MAN: (TO BARMAN) We'll be at the table in the corner by the fire.

BARMAN: Yes, thank you sir, we'll bring the food over in a few moments.

MAN (TO WOMAN). Here, you take the coats – I'll bring the drinks.

WOMAN: (V/O) (NARRATING)

Like all couples they had built up a database of preferences and foibles, knowledge hard won over the years of the relationship. At first there had been secrets and surprises, revelations to be deliciously discovered, and then as time went on, a stability, a reference book of behaviour, comfortably repeated in each other's presence. Now, they were simply riding companions, their initial passion and intimacy not forgotten, but conveniently shelved.

THE COUPLE MOVE TO AND SIT DOWN AT THEIR TABLE. AS THEY DO SO THE MAN LEANS ACROSS AND KISSES THE WOMAN.

WOMAN: What was that for?

MAN: Was that a bad thing to do?

WOMAN: Just unexpected. Maybe even surprising.

MAN: Maybe I should surprise you more.

WOMAN: Maybe you should.

MAN: It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.

WOMAN: What?

MAN: I don't know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly, wonderfully blue.

WOMAN: Well, it's a good job I don't wear my cossie back in London, then.

Might cause a bit of problem wearing it in Camden High Street if it has that effect.

MAN: Yes.

PAUSE

MAN: Remember when we down by Tarr Steps this afternoon. We were following the bridlepath where the woods come down to the river.

WOMAN: Yes.

MAN: You were leading –

WOMAN: As I usually do!

MAN: I was following. I was admiring the curve of your shoulder, the gentle sway of your body as it moved in harmony with the horse.

WOMAN: And so?

MAN: It made me think back to the first time we rode those paths. I felt the same as I did then. I wanted you. Or rather I wanted to be there. It just seemed the natural thing to do. Like the kiss just now.

WOMAN: (NARRATING) They were both new to university then, more than a decade ago – she a medic, he hedging his bets with an easy geography degree and a notion to become a teacher. They had come in a group of a dozen largely insolvent students, loftily calling themselves the University Riding Club’s Official Easter tour, underwriting the cost from the University’s Social Club’s coffers with some traditionally dubious student accounting. They had to borrow tents from the University Officer Training Corps and had a special rate from the local stables as one of the group was going out with the farmer’s daughter.

MAN: Do you remember that first weekend?

WOMAN: Yes. I forgot my airbed – I remember how hard the ground was and my sleeping bag was in a state. I often wondered why it took you so long to ask me out that weekend too. I could see you wanted to.

MAN: Well, you could have asked me instead.

WOMAN: No, I liked watching you trying to make up your mind. You never were very impulsive. I was glad you did eventually though.

MAN: (NARRATING). The weekend had been quite a success until the moment he had thought to encourage one of the farmer's geese into the girls' tent.

SCENE 2: FLASHBACK: THE CAMPSITE, IN THE FARMER'S FIELD.

EXT: EVENING. FRANTIC HONKING,
HISSING AND BARKING FROM THE GOOSE

WOMAN: (V/O) Where did that bloody goose come from? That bastard has shit all over my sleeping bag!

FADE DOWN GOOSE NOISES

MAN: (V/O) (NARRATING)
He was careful to keep a low profile for a day or so. It was only on the last afternoon that he managed to ask her if she would like to go for a drink when they got back to college. He was surprised when she said yes. But then, he told himself, the goose was hardly likely to grass him up.

FADE DOWN

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB (CONTINUED)

FADE UP: INT

WOMAN: I'm still not sure you should just go around kissing people out of the blue.

MAN: Shouldn't I have? I was just trying to remind you. Didn't it remind you?

MAN: Maybe. It was unsettling - I thought we were just friends now...kissing was something from the past and I'm not sure you can ever go back to your past. The clock never stops ticking, we can't be students again.

MAN: Do you really believe that? I think we can make whatever choices we like. And I wanted to kiss you because, when we swam this evening and I saw you in that costume it was like the clock had been wound back up and was ready to run again.

WOMAN: (UNSURE). Hmm, maybe ... Do you want to see what's happened to the food? And maybe another round? Here, take it out of this.

SCRAPING OF CHAIR AS HE GETS UP

WOMAN: (NARRATING). She wished he had not mentioned clocks. Maybe, she thought, you can wind the clock spring back up, but you can never move the hands backwards. She was thinking of her biological clock not her wristwatch. How things change. Not this pub, though. It's the same it has always been. Fifteen years since we first came here. We've changed though. She remembered that student flat – well more of a large bedsit then. And those evenings of 'pasta and passion', drinking cheap Italian

wine in the Mille Pine, walking home through Regents Park, listening for the penguins in the zoo, though they never heard them, then a warm bed. Four years turned into a companionable, efficient partnership – studying together, sharing a chicken casserole, increasingly sober as final exams approach. They didn't really change; they just sort of calmed down. Until that final dinner. He would be teaching in some London suburb. She had a six month WHO placement in Tanzania. It had been convenient, but it was time to move on. An evening dinner, a tidy endpoint.

FADE DOWN

FLASHBACK: INT: MILLE PINE RESTAURANT

FADE UP

MAN: Here, I've got something for you. I'd really like you to take it on your trip. It's sort of appropriate for an African adventure.

WOMAN: Thank you – how cute – where on earth did you find wrapping paper with such tiny elephants on it?

UNWRAPPING PARCEL

WOMAN: Oh, wow! A compass.

MAN: Just keep going south – if you start seeing penguins then you’ve gone too far.

WOMAN: That is such a nice thing, so thoughtful, and, well, so really nice.

MAN: Here, let me see. I can’t believe it. Look, the wretched thing is broken! North is that way, but the needle is pointing the other way.

WOMAN: I don’t understand.

MAN: They’ve screwed it up - painted the wrong end of the needle red!

WOMAN: You know you don’t really need to give me a present at all. It was a really kind thought though. I expect I’ll be tied up in the hospital in Dodoma though. Probably not much time for safaris.

MAN: Well, actually, I did have another choice for a present – but I was not ... not quite sure what you would you think of it.

WOMAN: Wow, that was good contingency planning then. And more elephant paper!

UNWRAPS SECOND PARCEL

WOMAN: What is it this time. A Swiss Army knife perhaps? Or a portable mosquito net – that would be useful. (PAUSE). (MORTIFIED) – Oh, it’s a ring!

FADE DOWN

FADE UP

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB (CONTINUED)

MAN: Do you want those last few chips?

WOMAN: Yeah, go on then.

PAUSE

WOMAN: So, do you think we should go back?

MAN: No, I don't actually want to go back, even if we could. Would you? If I'm honest, it was all a bit puzzling then. I don't think, looking back I ever quite knew what was happening, I mean, how serious was it? What did you want? Indeed, what did I want? You were right when you said that was then, and this is now. Why can't we just start from here, in this moment, and simply go forward from now.

MAN: But I don't want to stop being friends. I want to be friends and something more than that. Look, why don't you move in again?

WOMAN: What? Well, that came out of the blue!

PAUSE

WOMAN: Why did we stop having sex, do you think?

MAN: Well, you didn't have that blue swimsuit then.

WOMAN: No, be serious. I didn't really think about it at the time. But its been on my mind recently. It was more you than me that stopped it. I think it just gradually faded away. And then when you're sharing the same flat and you're not having sex, then you're no different from any other couple of people that are friends. At that point, you might as well not be in the same bed. Or even in the same flat. And then once you are only friends, then one friend moves out. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your life, they become just like the hundreds of other people in your life.

MAN: You know it wasn't really just me that stopped the sex. Not really. I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. You were too as I recall.

WOMAN: Yes, I do remember that. But it wasn't really the physical stuff that I started worrying about – it was when you gave me flowers and I didn't like the showiness of it, or when we held hands in the street, or when you gave me that running horse necklace. I don't think I wanted that sort of relationship then.

MAN: I never quite knew how to show – well, you know.... Then you got registrar and I was still stuck trying to educate the uncouth of Peckham – I felt it was all a bit pointless. You were off saving lives – I was trying to

tell some spotty youths that Texas was in America and not a band. And now you go to work in Prada, I go in jeans. I just felt I couldn't keep up.

PAUSE

MAN: I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming

WOMAN: Yes, I saw them too.

MAN: They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just downstream of the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their life depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?

MAN: I don't think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can't see any, then they fly to another perch and look again. Fish, nest, raise their young. They just are – well, what they are – happy, responding just in the moment. I envied them.

WOMAN: Wouldn't it be great to be just like them.

MAN: Why not? Can I kiss you again?

WOMAN: All right.

THEY KISS

MAN: You know, I've never told you, but that was me with the goose in the tent.

WOMAN: I know.

FADE DOWN

SCENE 3: THE FARMER'S FIELD

EXT: EARLY MORNING

MAN RATTLES HORSE NUTS IN BUCKET

MAN: (CALLING HORSES) Coo wee! Coo wee!

MORE HORSE NUTS RATTLING.

Come on then. Nuts for breakfast!

HORSES APPROACH

MAN: Here, you take the rugs. I'll make a start on brushing the mud off them.

MAN AND WOMAN V/O CONTINUES OVER
SOUNDS OF BRUSHING AND EXERTION

WOMAN: Okay, pass me that curry comb then.

MAN: How do you think they ended being called Bonny and Clyde? Seems a bit of an exotic choice for a Dartmoor pony and a Welsh cob.

WOMAN: Well, I can't see them robbing a bank – Clyde would make a rather pedestrian get-away vehicle, and Bonny would be waiting at the end of each gallop for him anyway, just like she did yesterday.

MAN: Yes, they don't look like they should make a working pair, but somehow they seem to make a companionable couple. I'd would have called them Chalk and Cheese myself.

WOMAN: Right, all done. I'll leave you to pick out the hooves and go back and get on with some bacon and eggs. Do you want two rashers or three?

PAUSE

MAN: I think I'll paint the spare room blue then, when we get back.

WOMAN: Or maybe pink...

PAUSE

MAN (NARRATING)

So many years later, the viridian and emerald greens,

The burnt umbers and siennas have all now faded into distant

grey –

But still the blues remain.

END

