

Kathy's Story

It's been almost a year since you were taken from me. That means I've had the nightmare of re-living the moment about 350 times. I can't always remember having the dream, but when I wake up and my Garfield night-shirt is still damp from perspiration, and my jaws ache from the grinding of my teeth, I know I've been through it again.

I'm seeing a therapist. That's why I'm writing this. Margaret, the counsellor I see twice a week, has been helping me try to cope with what happened in Florida. I don't think I'll ever get over it as such. Maybe one day I'll be able to think of that holiday and the way it ended, and I won't feel a wire tightening around my chest, squeezing the life, the will to live, out of me, until it hurts so badly I think I'm going to pass out from the pain. Margaret thinks I'm having problems telling her exactly how I feel, and she says this is perfectly natural, even after six months of therapy. But she thinks it might help if I wrote things down, that it would help me get things clear in my mind, and maybe help me talk to her about them during our sessions. She suggested writing it as a letter to someone who I would confide in absolutely, like my sister or my mum. But I wouldn't tell Claire absolutely everything, or even mummy. They both try to understand, but I don't think they can really. I know both of mum's parents died, but that was when she was still quite young, and I'm sure she doesn't remember it very well. I feel awful for writing this, because it makes it sound as though I'm saying my grief is deeper than hers, but I'm just trying to explain why I couldn't try to describe to her what it feels like. I thought of writing this to a fictitious person, almost as though I was saying it to Margaret and didn't have to hold back whenever I felt the pain return, when I try to tell her what it feels like to be without you. But that would seem strange too, so in the end I decided I'd write my feelings down as if I was talking to you, Mike. Because you were the only person I would ever confide in totally. I always knew that whatever I said to you, even if I thought I was being silly or paranoid or unself-confident, you'd understand and make me feel better. God I miss you so much. Writing this, I can almost convince myself that you're listening, or reading should I say, and I want to reach out and touch you, but I know I can't, so the tears start to well up again, and I have to stop.

I'm supposed to write down every thing that happened in roughly the right order. Margaret didn't say where to start. I suppose it really all began the day I found out about Debbie. That was nearly two years ago. It's strange the way these things all seem to happen in the summer, which is supposed to be a time of fun and happiness. Sometimes I feel as though I never want to see a sunny day again. I've gone over in my mind again and again why I decided to look through your jacket pockets that day. I'd never done it before, I swear. I think I must have had my suspicions about you, even though, as I was searching through your pockets, I was deliberately trying to block out any thoughts of what I was doing. I felt ashamed of invading your privacy, and I remember not looking at what I was doing, but holding the jacket up and rummaging around with my hand while just staring into space, like an automaton.

Of course, when I found the crumpled Visa receipt everything changed. It took me a little while to work out its significance. I knew you'd stayed at the Sea Front Inn when you

went to Blackpool with Derek on business, so that didn't seem odd in itself. But then I saw the date: 21st of June. That was a week previously, to the day, and the phone call I had from you that evening played back in my mind, as clear as a compact disc. You'd told me there was an emergency at the Terry's factory in Leeds, and you had to rush down there with Derek to try to minimize the damage to the feed tanks and see if you could repair the valves that had developed a fault. You'd probably stay overnight at a B & B rather than driving all the way back. You made that joke about it being the shortest night of the year, so we shouldn't miss each other too much. 21st of June, you see?

I didn't think anything of it, of course. It was the sort of thing that Radley's had you doing all the time, and I was used to it. But I still missed you. Even the next day I didn't suspect anything. Subconsciously I must have picked up guilt vibrations from you or something, because why else would I do what I did? It took about two seconds for me to realise what the Visa receipt was telling me. The first dawning was that you'd lied to me about where you'd been that night. The implications that followed from that swept over me in a wave of dread, and I had to sit down on the bed in case I fainted. I remember my face feeling hot; I must have been flushed. In the quiet bedroom, all I could hear was my breath coming in short bursts, and the blood rushing through my head, pulsing in time with my heart, which I could feel pounding inside me. I think just for a few moments I tried to deny it to myself, to believe that maybe I'd misunderstood what you'd told me on the phone. But I couldn't convince myself. In the eight years we'd been married, and the two we were together before that, I'd never suspected you of even being interested in anyone else, let alone having an affair. But now I knew with a certainty that made every nerve in my body jangle like an electric shock that the week before you'd been away from me, and with someone else.

The sensation was almost one of falling. Our marriage, our relationship, was more than the cornerstone of my life; it was the very foundation. Anything I'd built in the last eight years had been constructed on that bedrock. I don't mean I needed you to validate my life - I wouldn't have felt "incomplete" without you, and I don't think I was subsumed into the marriage, as mum used to tell me if she thought I was siding too much with you and not enough with her in an argument - but my stability was derived from that partnership, and the sudden realisation that it might be just an illusion opened up a yawning abyss beneath me. I needed you partly because I thought you needed me. If that wasn't the case, the worth of the whole of the last decade was thrown into doubt.

At the time I believed the next two hours would be the worst of my entire life. How I wish they still were. I fought to keep my emotions under control. They ranged from dread to anger, from clarity to confusion, from love to hatred. I remember most vividly just lying on the bed with my face buried in the pillow, weeping uncontrollably, trying to cry every last drop out before you came home. By the end my throat was sore from the almost child-like sobbing and my breath would only come in staccato gulps. I couldn't imagine feeling anything other than totally wretched ever again, though even through that veil of emotion, I noticed that I'd made a mess of the pillow case with my crying, and changed it for a clean one so you wouldn't notice anything was wrong. As if you wouldn't be able to tell the second you saw me.

As the afternoon stretched on, I gathered myself a little. As my thoughts became more

calm (though the anger stayed just beneath the surface, waiting to boil over again), I wanted to talk about it. I wanted to phone you at work and confront you with it in your office, to try to get at you in the same cruel way that you'd hurt me. But I couldn't. I thought it would be unfair. Unfair! There I was, dying the death of a thousand emotional cuts, and I was worried about being unfair to you. You always said you loved me for my kindness and understanding; how that was tested that afternoon. I thought about calling my mum, or Claire, or even popping into the library, even though it was my day off, just to tell Julia or one of the other girls. But I couldn't. It wasn't just out of a sense of fairness to you; I think if I'd tried to have a conversation about it, the sobbing would have started again.

I spent some time looking at myself in mirror, trying to see what you saw, to understand why you'd turned away from me. Usually I didn't think I looked bad for 29. Oh, I know my body didn't have the same post-pubescent, nicely-rounded firmness that it did in the second year of college. My skin had lost a little of its smoothness, small lines appearing around my eyes. I'd even found a solitary grey hair a couple of weeks before. But the aerobics and absence of children had helped me keep my figure, and I didn't need a lot of make-up to look good when we went out for the evening. I couldn't believe you'd go with someone else just for looks. But I remembered you saying once, I think it was not long after we got married, that if I ever got fat, you'd leave me. I tried not to show it, because I knew you were joking, but that comment hurt me deeply. I don't think men have any conception of the pressure a women can feel under to keep her looks and figure, always having to keep a step ahead of the competition. If I'd worked hard at that, though, it was as much for me as for you. I'd seen my mum let herself go a bit, and even Claire was starting fill out as she reached her mid-30s. But I'd blithely assumed I was doing all right, and that anyway, it was my mind you loved me for, as you'd told me so often in the past, sometimes jokingly, sometimes very earnestly. Now that complacency seemed ill-founded. Whatever was going on, I had a rival, and if I decided I wanted to try to keep you, I'd have to work at it.

At last you arrived home, shortly before six, in time for the early TV news, just like a normal day. I didn't know what I was going to say to you. I'd rehearsed a hundred lines in my head, but all of them sounded so stilted, like some dialogue from a bad film. Trying to imagine what you would say was even harder. Would you ask for my forgiveness? For a divorce? The fact that I found it so hard to predict frightened me all the more. I couldn't say a word when it came to it. All my energy was being used to keep my composure, to keep the flames of anger that were raging inside me from consuming me in their fire. I sat very still on the sofa, in a stiff, erect posture, hands resting on my knees, which were clenched tightly together. You didn't notice anything amiss at first, just breezing in and saying something like "Hello love, what's for tea?" You didn't notice my silence because you were already in the kitchen, checking the oven. Of course, it was empty. Cooking was the last thing on my mind. It was then that you looked at me properly, noticed the traces of redness around my eyes and nostrils from crying and nose-blowing. I'd tried to hide it with a bit of make-up, but hadn't succeeded very well. "Everything all right?" you asked. You came over to me and sat next to me on the sofa, putting your arm around me. I felt a strange heightening of the senses, and could detect the slight, long-summer-day odour from your shirt. No strange perfumes though.

The shield of frigidity I'd constructed around myself to try to protect me from the inevitable outpouring of emotions was fragile, and burst like a ruptured dam as soon as you touched me. "Oh Mike, I know where you were last Wednesday." Just having to speak caused my control to waver, and my eyes started to brim once more. I couldn't see you clearly through the distortion of salty tears, but I felt your body stiffen and saw you face blanch. You just said "Oh God." You removed your arm and seemed to shrink away from me, as if you were preparing to run if I became hysterical or violent. But you stayed seated, adopting a similar posture to me, elbows on your knees, face cupped in your hands.

I don't know how I got through that evening. Even when you'd finished explaining it, slowly, calmly and apologetically, even after I'd decided that you were telling the truth, I didn't know how to react. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when you told me it was Debbie you'd been with. After all, I'd seen her at the company barbecue, so I knew she was stunning. Or "a sexy little thing," as I think you'd described her to me when she first joined the firm. But she was so young, Mike. Almost a child, with her silly giggles and transparent innuendo. I felt insulted that you'd be interested in someone so unformed, and hurt that you could risk so much for a one-night-stand. I tried to understand what you told me: that you did it to prove that you could, to show yourself that you weren't totally repulsive to anyone except me (how repulsive do you think your actions made *me* feel?) That you were *curious*, after ten years sleeping with the same person, to see what it was like with someone else. I believed you when you told me that you realized immediately that it had been a dreadful mistake (well, immediately *afterwards*, anyway). I was relieved (though I tried not to show it) that it seemed to all be about sex. There was no hint from you that you felt anything other than physical attraction for Debbie, beyond "liking her as a person". I was secretly delighted that the sex wasn't even very good, because she'd been inexperienced and embarrassed (in spite of her *double entendre*-laced conversation) and wouldn't let you keep the light on. I even trusted you that it was just a one-night thing, and you would never look at her - I can't remember if you said "or anyone else" - again. But what I didn't know if I could do was to forgive you. You'd taken my trust and treated it with contempt. I felt abused, almost violated, like people who come home to find their houses burgled. I hated you for doing that to me. You had no right.

I think we were both drained by the end. It was upsetting to see you cry, in spite of all the tears that had flowed from me. I wanted to hug you and tell you I loved you and whisper it was all right. But it wasn't, and I couldn't. I was frightened to go to bed, because we would have to confront the issue of sleeping arrangements, and I didn't want to have to tell you I couldn't sleep with you in our room. I was glad when you offered to sleep in the spare room. There was that horrible embarrassed moment when we said good night, not knowing whether to touch or kiss or embrace, in the end just looking down at the floor, you staying where you were, and me stumbling tear-blinded up to the bedroom. I don't remember if I slept. I doubt it. My head was whirling. Snippets of conversation kept popping into my mind, things you'd said, assurances, promises, re-assurances, more promises, criticisms of yourself, of your weakness. At least you didn't use the facile excuse of having testosterone instead of oestrogen coursing through you, justifying your actions as "natural male instinct". I think you really were appalled with yourself, but still

only after the fact. "It's no reflection on you," you'd said. Of course it was! I wanted to run away from it, be outside of my mind looking in, so I could try to make some sense of it. I can still remember hearing the birds start to sing, the grey dawn showing faintly through the bedroom curtain. I thought to myself "Is this my life now? Waking up to birdsong, not knowing what to do, where to turn. How many mornings like this will there be?"

There were many, of course, you sleeping in the spare room, me waking up early, alone in that big bed, wondering if today I'd decide what to do. Because of course, I was the one making the decisions. You'd made it clear that you would do anything to keep us together. Debbie was forgotten. I wondered if you would have forgotten her so easily if she'd been more fun in bed? Or if she hadn't asked for a transfer to the Wetherby office because it was closer to where she lived? Your desire to please, to acquiesce to any demands I might make of you, short of accepting that it was over, made it harder in a way. It seemed weak. I almost wanted you to say "OK, I'll leave, it's what I deserve." But it touched me too. I saw the love in your eyes again. Even when we weren't talking about us and the future, when I caught you off guard (were you ever off guard at that time?) there was an intensity there, a brightness that had been dulled over the years of marriage, without either of us noticing. I thank God now that I didn't make you move out. That would have made it too easy to shut the door, to turn away, try to forget what we'd had before, and start again. I knew you deserved more than that. We both did. The marriage did.

The thaw came slowly. My heart was encased in an unmeltable block of ice, and my sense of betrayal kept it insulated against the warmth of your love. But we need heat to live, and I couldn't maintain that coldness. In the end, it became more of a strain keeping you out than letting you back in. It was easier once you stopped trying so hard to be contrite. You finally seemed to accept that nothing you could say or do would in itself make a difference, and it was just a matter of seeing how time would change my feelings. I remember the first time we laughed together again. You did a terrible impersonation of John Major's monotonous voice after he'd been on Radio 4, and for a moment I dropped my barrier of caution and distrust and anger, and I laughed openly. Our eyes met, and then the next thing I knew we were kissing. No, that's not the word. Devouring each other, a hungry, consuming kind of kissing, like we were a couple of long-lost lovers, coming together again after some terrible separation. The relief was palpable. I felt an oppressive weight lift from me. I didn't want you to feel that everything was perfect, but it was nice to be able to laugh again without worrying about you getting the wrong idea.

Of course, there were ups and downs after that. Sometimes I would have attacks of doubt. I would wake up in the night and think that you weren't in the bed, that you'd sneaked off for a secret rendezvous with a lover. I'd have to reach out and touch you to reassure myself. It was difficult to resume sex, even when you came back to our bed. You wanted to make love on that first morning we kissed again, right before leaving for work! I wouldn't do it though. I wanted to, in a way, but it was too soon. I know you thought that three months was an eternity, but it had to feel right. Making love with you again, having you inside me, was the ultimate form of acceptance, of re-uniting. To tell the truth, I was scared. My sex drive shrivelled when I found out about you and Debbie, and I was worried that it had died altogether. I was afraid that if we started to make love, I would see visions of you and her together and be unable to carry on. Or worse, you'd call me by her name. Stupid, I know. Eventually it happened, of course. You were patient and gentle,

which I loved you for, and while we were doing it, your unfaithfulness became just the merest shadow, almost imperceptibly occluding the light of our love-making, but still there nevertheless. I think about that time even now. It was like doing it for the first time again, but with the advantage of knowing each other's bodies, and not having the embarrassment of showing yourself to a stranger. Sometimes now, I miss the physical part of our togetherness. I lie on the bed, half dozing, stroking myself through my nightie, imagining that the hands touching my breasts are your hands. I touch myself down there, my fingers becoming your fingers, your tongue, making me feel the same wonderful way that you did. Is that terrible? I do feel guilty, but the tension builds up sometimes and I have to let it out. I can't imagine ever being with another man. I couldn't betray your memory in that way. At least with my way it keeps another part of you alive in my mind. Margaret says that eventually we have to let go, to free ourselves so we can live the life that our deceased love ones would want us to have. But I don't want to, you see? I can't turn my back on you, not so soon.

I suppose I must have been wary of allowing the stagnation to creep in again when I suggested the holiday in Florida. We'd done France for the previous three years, camping in the Dordogne, just the two of us the first year, then with Betty and Dave the next two years. It had been fun, renting bikes and going for long rides amongst the vineyards, finding an ice-cold stream to bath in and play childish splashing games, feasting on the good, cheap local wines, and fresh, runny cheese. But the same thing a fourth time would have seemed too much like routine. I saw the Holiday Programme's report on fly-drive holidays in Florida. They showed the beaches, with the long, empty stretches of sand and palm trees bent inland away from the sea breezes. They showed the excitement of downtown Miami, the fantasy land of Disneyworld and Epcot, the silly roadside attractions like Gator World. It looked like fun, it was cheap because of the weak dollar, we booked it.

I remember looking at you as we got ourselves comfortable on the plane. You had a boyish excitement about you, as though we were setting off on a great adventure. I saw you gazing out of the window, trying to catch sight of our baggage as it was loaded on to the plane. I felt excited too, but not in the same way. For me the adventure wasn't that I was travelling outside of Europe for the first time, but that we were doing it together, alone. It would be just us, sharing the experience, with no anxious phone calls from my parents to ask how I was, if we were still thinking of going to a marriage counsellor (I'm glad we didn't, that we managed on our own), if I was still bursting into tears at unfortunate times. There would be no emergencies at work for you to worry about, valves to fix, orders to chase up. We would have the time to luxuriate in each other's company, rediscover those things that made us swear so solemnly in St. Patrick's in York that we'd spend the rest of our lives together. I had a little plan worked out too. I'd stopped taking the pill about three months previously. We'd talked about children the night I found out about Debbie, and how maybe we'd left it too long, and that it had added to the drifting apart. But it never came up again. I think you were too scared to mention it, because if I said No, it would prove I hadn't forgiven you. Then I got the idea of it being a "surprise", so I didn't say anything either. Sitting on the plane, holding your hand like a teenager on a school outing, I mentally hugged myself as I imagined getting pregnant, and even imagined telling the child when she was old enough that she (I knew it would be a

girl) was conceived under a palm tree in Ft. Lauderdale, or even better, in the Magic Kingdom!

My first impression of Florida was formed when we stepped out of the terminal at Miami airport, into a wall of heat. I'd never experienced such a contrast between inside and outside of a building. I felt like going straight back inside again, but that was before I realised that all the cars were air-conditioned too. You looked at me sheepishly and you pulled off your woolly sweater, and said something like "By gum, it's 'ot!" It was funny the way you started to exaggerate your Yorkshire dialect as soon as we arrived, as though you were keeping a bit of England with you.

We nearly had an argument as soon as we arrived. You'd assumed that we'd share the driving, with me doing at least some, if not quite half of it. My darling Mike, how I wish I hadn't been so stubborn. Margaret says I have to stop blaming myself, that we can't hold ourselves responsible for everything that happens to those we love, just because a decision we made may have affected the outcome. She can say that, but it doesn't stop me thinking: if only. If only I'd not been so stubborn, if only I'd been a bit more courageous about driving in Florida, just like thousands of Brits and Aussies and Kiwis and Japanese do every year. They all make the adjustment, driving on the other side of the road on busy motorways, and you don't see banner headlines reporting that coach loads of Japanese tourists have died when their driver drove onto the exit of a freeway by mistake. If only I'd left my driving licence at home, then I would have had an excuse. But I had it, so my only excuse is selfishness. If only you'd put up more of a fight, but I could tell you didn't want to make a scene in the rental office, and I detected some residual "making a special effort to please", as though you feared that if you pushed it I'd say "Right, that's it, I'm leaving you."

But Margaret's right about one thing. I can't change anything. I would make any sacrifice to be able to change that first day. Sometimes when the pain becomes almost unbearable, when I'm at home, lying sobbing on the bed, my hands squeezed tight, fists pummelling the pillow, I want to hurt myself physically. I bite hard on the back of my hand, sometimes drawing blood. I almost believe in those moments that if I can suffer enough pain myself, that I can bring you back, that I would have atoned for what I did to you, and I'll look up, and see your blurred form through my tears, and I'll blink them away, and you'll be sitting on the edge of my bed, smiling stupidly, like you did when you told one of your daft knock-knock jokes. It hasn't worked though. Maybe I'm not hurting enough. Maybe I should cut myself with a knife, or bang my head against the wall. If I believed enough that it would work, that my pain would allow your re-entry into this world, I would do it. But even in my most insane moments, when I sit on the bed with my knees drawn up, chin resting on them, rocking gently, and just saying your name over and over, even then, I retain a nugget of rationality, and I know it's done, and there's nothing I can do to bring you back.

The holiday kept some of its promises, but reneged on others. It was sunny, the beaches golden, the sunsets romantic, the places we visited interesting, hotels clean and cockroach-free. But the travelling was long and boring, and some of the roads were a nightmare. Of course that affected you much worse than me. Your suffering brought out the mother in me. I wanted to cradle your head in my arms and hold you against my

bosom and make gentle cooing sounds. But the togetherness worked as I'd hoped. Some of those evening walks we took, when the temperature had become almost reasonable in the breeze from the ocean, reminded me of the trips to France, and earlier than that, when we went hiking on the moors, you taking a fortnight off from your first ever job, and me enjoying my last summer vacation as a student. Those ten years melted away with heat of the balmy Florida evenings, and the warmth of what I was feeling for you.

I know I should be trying to write about that last day now, but it's so hard. Every time I think of it, I stare into space and my mind goes blank rather than re-live it yet again.

It happened so quickly. You'd been suffering more than usual from the strain of driving, and seemed more tired too. It was almost the end of the journey, and you were relieved. So was I. I'd enjoyed the holiday, but it was time to go back and start to live our proper lives again. The reparation of the last few months was real enough, but now it seemed superficial compared to the way it used to be between us, and to how it felt in Florida. It was as though we'd been doing an impersonation of a married couple, doing and saying all the right things, even feeling them, but only an inch deep. Now it felt like an ocean of love again, and I wanted to go home and swim in it, to celebrate with our friends and families around, even though they wouldn't know what we were celebrating.

Sorry, I'm avoiding it again. We stopped at the rest stop that I noticed, and nearly had that accident with a lorry. I could tell you wanted to scream with frustration and exhaustion, and I tried to get you to ring Bob and tell him we'd be a day late, but you didn't want to put him out. That was like you; you could be so considerate. It was peaceful at the rest stop. I could almost see the waves of tension rise from your body as you started to relax. We both dozed. There was an awful commotion outside. You tried to drive away, but that man smashed the window before you could start the car. Then he killed you. Oh Mike. My sweet, sweet darling. Why did it happen? Why couldn't he have shot me too? Why why why why. I can't even blame it on mum's God because I stopped believing in Him a long time ago. But if there is a heaven, you must be there. Please wait for me.

Time hasn't had much meaning since that day. There was the trial, of course. They caught the man and his two friends almost immediately. I had to be a witness. I recognised him straight away from the scar on his cheek, and those mad eyes. They showed pictures of the inside of the car in court. I had to rush out to the toilet to be sick. I didn't stay for the verdict. I couldn't feel anything for him. Hatred, forgiveness, understanding, bewilderment, none of it matters. His mother wrote to me a couple of months after the trial. Her name is Martha. She sounded sweet, as though she was a good mother, and couldn't understand what had happened to her son. She said he's on "death row". I haven't written back. I want to, to tell her that I don't feel any anger or bitterness. My grief doesn't allow room for that. I can't think of the words to say now though. I hope she doesn't think I'm being rude. I will write back, soon.

Everyone back in England was marvellous, as you'd expect. We had a service for you. I was so moved by some of the things people wrote in their cards and said to me on the day of the funeral. You were so loved, Mike. Dave told me about the time you lent him that money when his house sale fell through and he couldn't get a bridging loan. And Stewart talked about the nights you stayed at the hospital with him when Sonia was in intensive

care after her car crash. I felt so proud of you. Debbie came. She didn't say much, just left some flowers with a simple message. She looked small and sad, not how I remembered her, so I gave her a big hug before she left. It helped to have someone else's grief to try to unburden; it took my mind off my own.

And now little Michael's nearly four months old. He's my reason for living. He was conceived not on a beach or even in the Magic Kingdom, but in a Holiday Inn. He was nearly a month premature, and they kept him in an incubator. He looked so small and vulnerable in there. I'm not sure I could have coped if he'd died, but he's a fighter, I can tell that already. He's doing fine, a bit small for his age, but he's got plenty of time to grow. You'd be so proud, Mike. I can picture you bending over his cot, doing your silliest baby-talk, just as you used to do with Claire's Jonathan. I smother him with love. I've got a surfeit with you gone, and I've got to make up for his not having a father. It's going to be hard. They're going to keep my position for me at the library, and I can go back part-time when I'm ready - mum will help with the baby-sitting, and I'll need the money for Michael. When he's older, I'll tell him about the father he never knew, what a wonderful man he was and how he must try to do him proud.

I must stop this now. I've got a session with Margaret this afternoon and have to get Michael round to his grandparents'. I think this has helped a little. I feel a little more at peace now. I hope if your spirit lives on, it's in peace too. Good-bye for now my love.

Your ever loving,

Kathy