

AFTERNOONS

The sea froze that winter. The shallow tidal run rippled over the shores and then froze to a solid sheet. Ice formed on the groynes and the metal struts of the pier. The bait diggers had to break through two inches of ice to dig for the buried lugworms. It was the coldest winter for decades, and the men on the lock pit had to work shifts to prevent the harbour gates freezing.

'You'll not go down there,' Frank Elwiss threatened his wife, and she laughed delightedly as she cleared the dinner things, banging the pots down into the sink and pushing him out of her way. 'It's dangerous, Cath, you hear me!'

He was on afternoons, and due to go on duty for two o'clock, and as he spoke he was fastening the straps of his overalls, struggling with the cheap elastic she'd used to mend the shoulders.

'You listening to me, Cath!'

'Yes, Frank.'

'You listening!'

At the sink, she turned round and leant back against the cold enamel. She'd already taken her brassiere off in the lavatory, so that her nipples stood up firmly in the cold.

'You'll what?' she said quietly, and when he looked up, she moved closer and helped him fasten the last button. 'You'll what, Frank?' she whispered, letting him kiss her neck and press against the thin material of the dress. Laughing, he pushed her back against the sink,

his face red and confused.

‘Bitch.’

‘Isn’t there time?’ she asked, raising her eyebrows innocently as he opened the kitchen door.

‘You just listen to what I tell you. All right?’

Out in the small back yard, he wheeled his bike out of the coal shed and opened the passage gate. He didn’t turn to look at her. When she heard his footsteps going up the narrow passage, she laughed suddenly, feeling the colour rise in her face.

‘Silly bugger,’ she said angrily, massaging her breasts where the hard buttons on the overalls had hurt her. ‘Daft silly bugger.’

When the boy woke up, she dressed him in the new coat with the imitation velvet collar and walked with him down the road to the railway crossing. All week, he’d been asking to feed the gulls.

‘They’ll die, Dad,’ he said, his eyes shining, his voice piping in his excitement.

‘So’ll you, you go down those sands,’ Frank said. ‘It’s dangerous, winter tides.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Frank. It’s all froze, anyhow.’

‘They’ll die, Dad, if we don’t.’

‘No.’

She lost her patience in the end. He was always going on about the foreshore, the coastal tides and the creeks out beyond the fairgrounds.

‘I know what it’s like,’ he said when she laughed at him, his black hair falling in his eyes and his cheeks shining. He was getting fat, all the steam puddings she kept giving him. His eyes were bruised with lack of sleep. When his mother came round to see the boy she looked at Catherine angrily, snapping at her about dust on the mantelpiece.

‘I don’t mind you doing it,’ Catherine smiled insolently, enjoying the little woman’s fury, her confusion. She was dark, like her son, but quick and nervous, irritated by Catherine’s sullen movements and untidy red hair.

‘You should listen to Frank,’ Mrs Elwiss said when she heard them rowing about feeding the seagulls. ‘You’re a stranger, these parts. He knows the sands. He knows what he’s talking about.’

Catherine laughed at her.

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Clever, aren’t you.’

‘I can’t help it.’

‘You wouldn’t talk to your own mother like that.’

Catherine couldn’t help laughing. She’d come to the town from Sheffield to work in one of the quayside cafes. Frank had his dinner there when he was working days. He’d lived in the dock area all his life, working on the lockpit since he was fifteen.

‘I fancied a bit of sea air,’ she teased him when he asked her why she’d left Sheffield.

He asked her out on her first day, and laughed when his mother sneered about canteen lasses.

‘She’s a slut,’ Mrs Elwiss said when he told her they were getting married.

Mrs Elwiss was a caretaker, living in rooms at the back of the Methodist Chapel. When he told Catherine what she’d said, she just laughed. It was something about their solemnity that aroused her. When Frank was being pompous she had to do things to excite him, make him blush at her behaviour. When Mrs Elwiss talked about the Chapel, or the way Frank knew all about the coastline, she was helpless with giggles. Their awful seriousness reduced her to tears.

But Mrs Elwiss was right about Catherine’s mother. Nobody ever laughed in her face. A big, nasty-minded woman, she treated her two daughters with contempt and caused as much trouble as she could for her sons, ridiculing their wives and nodding with a tight smile when anything went wrong. When her husband died, she cried bitterly at the funeral, and then rowed with Catherine’s brother about some furniture he’d put in the back of his van.

She ignored Catherine’s letters and refused to have anything to

do with her grandson.

'I got eight others,' she sneered spitefully when Catherine travelled over to Sheffield by train on one of the special summer day trips. 'You leave this house, you leave for good.'

She was working then in a fish and chip shop, hobbling behind the counter because of an infection in her varicose veins. She was eighty-three and weighed nearly seventeen stone. Though Catherine never said anything, she was as foul-mouthed as the lumpers Frank worked with down the docks.

'You got the bread, Mum?'

Holding Paul's hand, she stood with him for a moment at the top of the railway embankment. The wind blew icily off the sea, and her eyes watered as her hair whipped at her face, a long strand catching in her mouth. At the estuary, a couple of trawlers were steaming away towards the horizon, and along the shores, gulls swept and screamed, circling above the deserted tideline.

'You are impatient, Paul,' she laughed, shivering as the wind lifted her coat and the boy danced around her.

'The gulls, the gulls, the gulls.'

Taking the bread, he chased off ahead of her along the sands, and she walked slowly behind him, watching as he threw handfuls at the wheeling birds.

They were alone on the foreshore. The tide was right out, and even the bait diggers had given up trying to break through the ice. A few waders pecked disconsolately at the water, and slipped on the frozen surface, but as far as Catherine could see the shore was completely deserted.

She hated it.

She hated the winter emptiness, booming with wind and seagulls, the noisy thunder of the sea. What she liked was all the crowds and lights of the summer season, when the fairgrounds were packed with tourists and you couldn't move on the promenade for people out having a good time. She took Paul down even when he was in his pram, and, when he was four, went with him on all the big

rides. She liked the pushing and the laughter of the crowds, not this desolate, bleak silence. She loved the fairgrounds, overcrowded like the dingy terraces where she'd spent her childhood.

At the end of the bay, they found the swans.

'They're not seagulls, Mum,' Paul said, coming back to her nervously and taking her by the hand.

'What love?'

'Them birds.'

He pointed along the sands, and in a group by a breakwater the swans stared back at them, their necks reaching up angrily, their small black eyes like pebbles in the watery sun.

'They aren't gulls, are they, Mum?'

Catherine stared at them, shocked by their size, their sudden appearance on the beach.

'Don't be daft, Paul. They're swans.'

'Swans.'

'Haven't you ever seen a swan?'

'No.'

'There were no end in Sheffield. In the parks. They had them in all the parks.'

There were eight of them. They seemed to be sheltering in the lee of the breakwater. There was no food, and they pecked angrily at the frozen ice, trying to break through to water. The sound of their beaks carried clearly across the sands, an abrupt, sharp tapping.

'Are these from Sheffield, Mum?'

'Fool.'

She let go of his hand in irritation, but he reached for her again, looking up nervously and then back at the group of birds.

'Aren't you going to feed them?' Catherine laughed, letting him grip her hand.

'No.'

'They'll be hungry.'

'It's for the gulls.'

'You've given the gulls plenty. The swans might die.'

He looked up at her again, his hand very small in hers, his black hair brushed back and his eyes shining darkly like his father's.

'They won't die.'

'They might.'

After a long pause, he pulled his hand free and took a step forward.

'All right,' he said, waiting for her to give him what was left of the bread. 'They're hungry, aren't they?'

'Be careful, though, Paul.'

He took the bread and moved nervously towards the breakwater.

'Don't go too near,' she called, keeping her voice level but holding her hand quickly to her mouth. 'That's near enough now, Paul.'

At the edge of the pool of water near the groyne, Paul stopped and stared at the swans. They were watching him, their necks swaying up and down, their heads turning away and ducking nervously towards the water. The one nearest Paul put its head right down to the ground and hissed steadily, its black eyes fixed on the motionless boy.

She couldn't move. A gull screamed overhead, circling above them. The trawlers from the estuary had almost disappeared over the horizon.

Along the shore, a man was walking with a dog, let loose and running over the sands. When she tried to speak, her voice trembled and then croaked, like her father coughing each time he lit a cigarette.

'There are plenty of swans in Sheffield,' she said stupidly, and caught her hand to her mouth.

'Throw the bread, Paul.'

At her words, the boy seemed to wake up. He reached out and tossed a big lump of bread at the swan nearest to him. The swan reared its neck upright and hissed loudly but then blinked down at the bread and picked it up with a quick swoop of its beak. The other swans stood motionless, watching, one of them still pecking angrily

at the frozen water. When Paul broke off some smaller pieces from the loaf, they all started to move forward, slipping on the ice and walking splayfooted towards him.

‘Little bits, Paul,’ she shouted, not daring to move as he began to walk steadily backwards towards her. ‘Little bits.’

The swans kept following. As he broke the loaf, the boy laughed and turned and grinned at her, his face bright red, his eyes black with excitement.

‘Just small bits, for heaven’s sake.’

By the time the bread was all gone they were running along the sands. The swans followed in a crazy, rushing movement, craning their necks and beating their wings in the air, their beaks making funny banging noises and their loud hisses echoing over the empty sands.

‘Run, Paul.’

Grabbing his hand, she almost carried him up the railway embankment and away from the frozen shores. The swans followed as though they’d gone insane at the taste of food. She felt the sweat pouring down her face and down the back of her dress. Her body was wet through with sweat as she struggled across the slippery railway tracks and down the bank the other side to the steps to their road.

Paul was sobbing by the time they reached home. She had to carry him down the passage and hold him while she got the kitchen door open. Behind her, the webbed feet of the swans echoed in the narrow passage, and as she pushed Paul into the kitchen and slammed the door behind her, a flurry of wings clattered into the small yard and a heavy beak thudded into the thin wood of the door.

Paul screamed.

Holding him, she buried his face in her arms. She rocked him steadily, crouching down on the cold floor. At each bang at the door he let out a yell of fright, and she held him close, soothing him through her own tears, her laughter shaking her until she could

scarcely hold him any longer.

When the swans went quiet, they stood together in the dark kitchen, listening for sounds of movement.

'What're they doing, Mum?' the boy asked, his eyes wide with fear, his face drained white and exhausted.

She shook her head and tried to push the hair back off her face.

'I don't know,' she whispered.

'Why're you laughing?'

'I don't know.'

She held her breath, trying to control her shaking. She closed her eyes, and felt suddenly cold, the sweat in her hair making it damp and unpleasant on her forehead. She leaned over the sink and peered into the yard, hoping to see the yard empty. In the wintry light, the swans stood beneath the window, pecking at the frozen yard, craning their necks as they waited.

Frank came home early because there were no ships and the other men wanted overtime. He walked down the passage, and cleared the swans with a sweeping brush. He had to kick at them and rattle the brush to make them move. They hissed and banged their wings as he shouted.

Mrs Pearson next door had told him all about the commotion.

When the swans had gone, he knocked loudly on the kitchen door, and brought Mrs Pearson in for a cup of tea.

'You shouldn't feed 'em, love, if you don't know what you're doing,' she said, beaming at Catherine through the thick lens of her spectacles. 'They're not pets.'

When Mrs Pearson had gone, Catherine kept the boy on her knee, rocking him gently backwards and forwards, singing under her breath as Frank made himself some more tea.

'You came home early,' she said, not looking at him when he sat down at the table.

'That's right.'

'Good job,' she smiled, humming as the boy nodded to sleep.

'Isn't it!'

Frank stirred his tea and cooled some in the saucer, blowing on it and watching her as he drank. When he put the cup down on the floor, his hand shook, and tea spilled onto the carpet. He picked the cup up, staring at her, challenging her to speak.

She went on singing. She could feel the child's body, warm through her dress.

'Shouldn't he be in bed?' Frank said, his voice tense in the quiet.

'Oh no,' Catherine laughed, looking up at him and smiling calmly. 'Oh no, not after what happened. You don't know what they'll dream.'