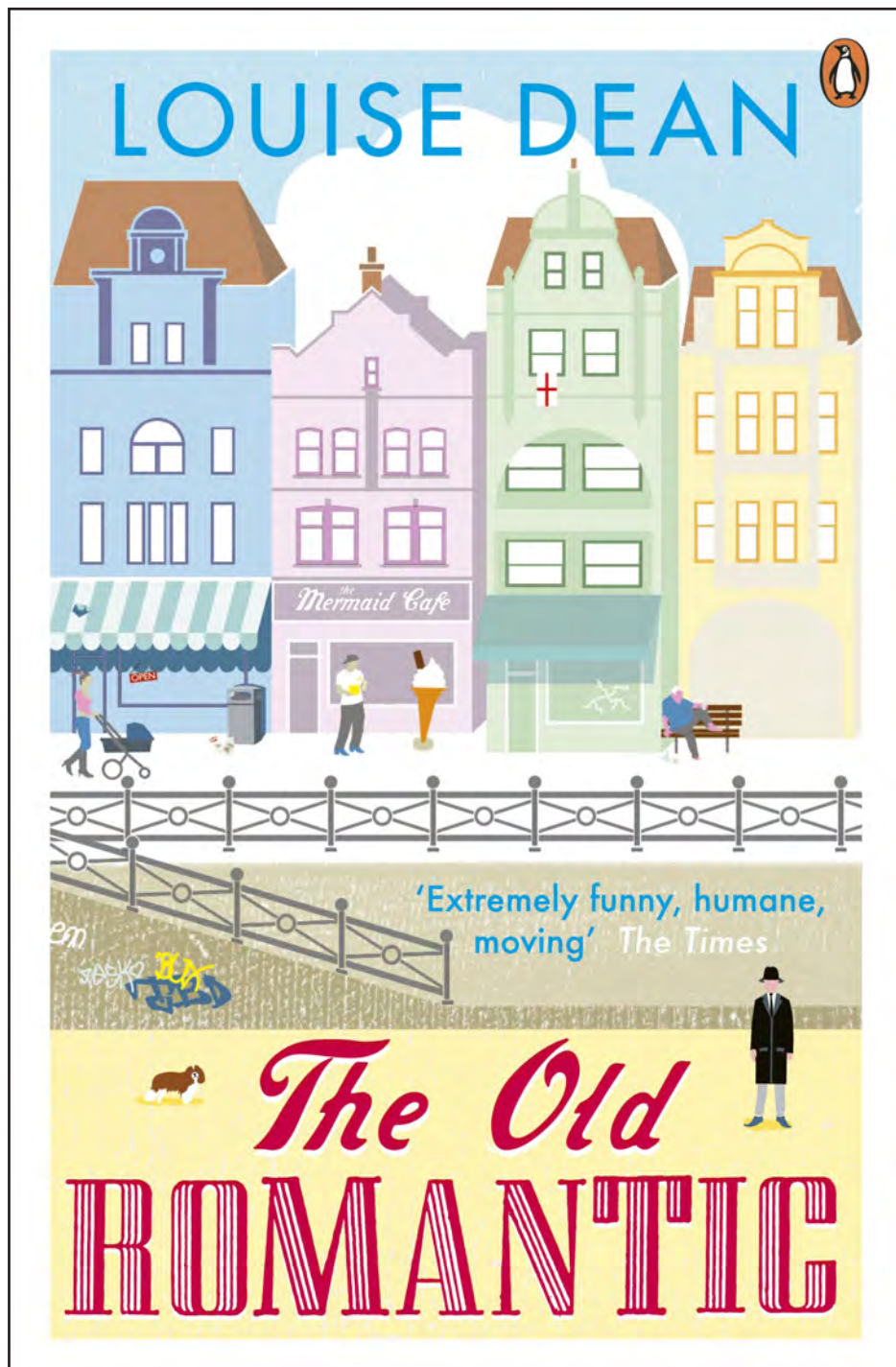


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An extract from *The Old Romantic* by Louise Dean

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The Old Romantic

by

Louise Dean

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I

People seem to tumble down to Hastings and not get up to go home again. It's where they turn up, every Jack and Jill that ever fell out with the family, lost a job, had half an idea, got a bad habit. The town is a huddle of administrative towers and down-at-heel shops with their backs turned on the sea views.

Poor Hastings. The steam train once chuffed proudly into Warrior Square where the statue of the Empress of India stood with her hooded eyes on the sea. The minor royals played here for a season, the gentry's carriages drew up at the West Hill lift, the bourgeois bought villas in St Leonards. But now the Olympic-sized bathing pool is gone, the model town vandalized and the pier closed. Lettered rock congeals in cellophane under blow heaters and steel udders drop soft whip in souvenir shops. In the tuppenny arcade, on any given day of the week, there'll be an old man feeling for change in the trays.

The seafront west to St Leonards is a parade of four-storeyed Regency guesthouses that display 'For Sale' or 'To Let' signs. In size and colour, they are as uniform as a pack of custard creams and nothing bothers the skyline until the end of the promenade where 'Marine Court' soars – a 1930s fantasy, a block of flats masquerading as a cruise liner.

Where the seafront ends, the buildings kneel, going from three storeys to two, and the twentieth century bobs and jogs along in semis until it's brought up short at the Bo Peep pub. On a blackboard tied to a lamp post, the pub has two bands chalked up for this weekend; Friday night's 'Shameless Behaviour' will be followed on Saturday by 'Dirty Shoes'. From here on is the

road to Bexhill, a few miles of terraced houses, lining a corridor through which the traffic is relentless. This is the area known as Bulverhythe; it is where his father lives now.

Nick's shoulders round as he scans the house names. He ducks when they pass under a railway bridge, and slows the Range Rover to a crawl. Those obliged to go round him honk censoriously, all the heavier on the horn because of the car it is.

'A bungalow,' Dave said. 'You'll find it.'

His father's is the only house reduced to a single storey of meanness on this street and it's the worst placed. Two lanes of traffic careen down the steep hill from the right and spill cars outside the old man's place, branching left and right at his very front door. Ken lives slap bang on the junction, and in between the traffic lights.

Nick pulls up on to the pavement without indicating, and the pair of them, he and Astrid, sit tight with the great car rattling and shuddering in the wake of the abuse and hooting of the passing cars.

It is fifteen years since he last saw his father.

This is not his town; this is his father's town. This is not coming home. He did that when he moved back to the Weald, where two counties meet in hills and valleys, in a hinterland of hop bine and tractor track, white weatherboard cottage and oast house, fruit field and orchard. That morning when he walked the dog, with woodsmoke forming halos above the dwellings, the countryside of his childhood seemed primitive to him – with no tarmac, no pylon, no telephone mast visible at all. Walking brings back memories. He likes to potter into the past and nip into the future, the way the dog moves, a waggy-tailed waverer on the scent of something good and aware too of other pleasures all about.

When they went over the stile on to the newly ploughed field, the dog ran at its centre and rooks took to the skies vexed and carping and cawing, circling in a posse. It was March, but winter presided despite the farmer's efforts to kick-start spring. The field reeked of manure, and Nick had a flashback of his brother Dave squatting on the white seat of Nick's new Raleigh bicycle, bought for him for getting the scholarship to private school, as he wheeled him home.

'Don't tell Mum, right? You won't tell Mum, will you?'

And the first thing he'd said, bursting through the kitchen door: 'Dave's shat himself, Mum! He's got it all down his legs!'

All sorts of betrayals, he'd thought sadly, remembering his brother's face, all sorts of betrayals to get ahead. An elder brother is always on the make. His little brother was dismayed, on the other hand, if he got anything at Nick's expense. Whether

it was merely a good stout stick or a brand-new toy, Dave would look at it, then look at Nick. 'We could share it,' he'd say, 'or you could just have it.'

Before Christmas, his only contact at all with his mother and father was through his brother.

'They've not spoken in ages. Donkey's years,' Astrid says in company and he lets it pass, nods it on its way, this shorthand, this convenience, and gets in the next round. But there is no nonchalance, never mind the number of years. Poor put-upon Dave has been duty-bound to all parties to pass unkindness back and forth; and he's done so, too good-natured to be good. The hurt is thus still keen.

'God almighty,' Nick says to Astrid now, peeping at his father's house, humorous and rueful, 'I did mention to you that my father was a touch working class, didn't I?'

'Perchance' is the name painted on to a cross section of a log, varnished and tacked to the guttering over the front door of the bungalow. The front garden is concrete. The other houses have two-foot-high walls for decency's sake but his has been demolished. Weeds have sprung up in the cracks of the forecourt. There's a lean-to shelter outside the bungalow with a corrugated yellow plastic roof and under it is a tall set of shelves stacked with various plastic bottles, some with their heads cut off: cooking oil, window cleaner, plant food. There is a decrepit Christmas tree in a pot, and an old Queen Anne wing-backed chair bearing a large string bag of onions.

They sit there with the engine running. She turns the bracelets on her wrist. 'Grim,' she says lightly.

3

The net curtains drop back into place in the window and out of the front door comes the couple: a short woman, no more than five foot, rotund and orange-coated, something like a Russian doll, followed by an old man who is tall and angular. She is red-faced and merry; he is pale and disdainful.

‘Oh, shit me, it’s the Krankies!’ says Astrid, looking at the small stout woman in her mac, support socks and rain bonnet, twisting a plastic carrier bag.

Ken pushes the front door to test that it’s locked shut. When he turns round, he does not so much as raise his head. He walks bowed and solemn in stark contrast with his wife, who is waddling ahead eager and open-mouthed. The stubble on his jaw glitters. He bears the weight of a navy-blue raincoat as if it’s a tarpaulin. He has the translucent hair of a toddler: a floss in a soft white quiff. There’s something about it that begs for a small Cadbury’s Flake, Astrid thinks, one side of her mouth curling into a smile.

Nick opens his door, lets in the sea air and the seagulls’ screams.

The first phone calls from the old man were silent, but Nick could hear the gulls in the background, just as he can hear them now; a chorus of outrage, remorseless and repetitive, stirring up an age-old ache.

‘Love you,’ says Astrid.

He turns his collar up and gives her a wink, but his face is dismal when he goes to face his father again.

It would not be your traditional family roast lunch, she

thinks, but then it hadn't been your traditional Christmas call that got this particular ball rolling. She'd amused their friends with it all on Boxing Day in the pub.

'I couldn't believe it! I mean, call me old-fashioned but in our family we have turkey and stuffing on Christmas Day and a call from Auntie Jan in Portsmouth. So there we are, paper hats on, about to pour the gravy and the phone goes, and Laura's like, Mum, who's Nick on the phone to? And I'm like, It's his dad, darling, he's just wishing him a merry Christmas. And the next thing you hear from the conservatory is Nick screaming, And you're nothing to me either, you old bastard!'

Nick had stood his ground there at the bar, pint in hand, and smiled with his mouth, attempting a comedic sangfroid, but when they left just before midnight, in the cold night of the car park, he caught hold of Astrid and said, 'You tell me. What kind of a man speaks to his son that way?'

And when she looked into his eyes in the lamplight and heard his breath catch, she saw what he wanted and gave it to him.

'I know,' she'd said. She kissed him on the mouth and held his face and stroked his hair. 'I know. It's terrible.'

4

There was no contact there on the forecourt under the low grey sky. They were two men pulling their coats to, in the wind. They held their faces sideways on to each other. Each seemed to find something in the distance to dismay him. When Nick stuffed his hands into his pockets, his father did the same. When he spoke, he jerked his head. When his father spoke, he jerked his head too. June, Ken's wife, stood between them, gleeful, looking from one to the other. Her mouth was moving and she was nodding at Nick and nodding at Ken, commending one to the other.

When the windows fogged, Astrid used the button to lower the driver's window. She leant across to peer into his wing mirror and observe them. The car seemed suddenly to become part of the scene – huge, black and looming – and she was embarrassed.

Nick's father was wearing pointed shiny shoes. His raincoat was immaculate. His trousers sharp of crease. There was something of the 1950s about him. He was scowling. 'How long does it take from where you live? We've been waiting since midday.'

'Is it Tenterden where you are?' June asked. 'Did you come through Hawkhurst? Is that bus station still there? It's an hour on the bus if you get a good change-over at Hawkhurst.'

'It takes about half an hour in the car,' said Nick.

'You must of drove like a nutter if it took you half an hour.'

'It's only twenty miles, Ken,' put in June, affably. 'And the traffic on a Sunday isn't like on the weekdays.'

'How do you know? You never drove it.'

'And look at this!' said June, bringing the Range Rover into

the conversation with her arm. 'It's bigger than our house! I say, Kenneth, did you see the car your son's driving now?'

Astrid sat up in her seat and checked the traffic over her shoulder. It was time to be taken account of. The lights changed and she dropped down out of the car and slid along the side to arrive at the rear in front of them all.

The men had their hands in their pockets. She put her hands in her pockets too. The father sucked in his cheeks and raised his eyebrows, his expression of disapproval of both her and the car as plain as if Nick had produced a hooker from a stretch limousine.

'Hi,' she said.

'All right,' said the old man, more speaking for himself than enquiring after her.

She greeted June with cheek kisses, and it was as if the woman was turned to stone by such a display. In her throat, June made the gurgling noise of a chicken brooding.

'Well, I never did. Well, Ken? You didn't expect to see your own son turn up like this, did you now? With this posh lady too.'

The old man indicated the car to her with an impatient wagging finger. 'Come on, or else we'll be late.'

Nick took June's arm to help her into the rear. There was a small step up and her hard skirt, her bad joints and stout legs conspired with her easily triggered sense of humour to make getting her into the car quite a palaver. She was straining and whooping, in contrition and amusement. Once in, and shifted across to the right side, she sat holding her handbag, panting, a lock of hair over one eye. 'I'm all out of puff, the man said!'

Nick went to take his father's arm. He was shaken off. His father put a hand on the seat and a hand on its headrest and pulled himself inside. Sitting sideways, the old man's legs hung in the door well and, as an afterthought, he at last drew them in.

When Nick pulled out on to the main road, Astrid saw his

face was set with concentration as if it were really a difficult thing, this driving business.

'I like to keep my mind active,' June prattled pleasantly. 'Now, I know from the milometer on David's car that it's nine miles to Fairlight. Harley Shute, Hollington. Up Blackman Avenue on to Old Harrow Road, then Sedlescombe Road North past the Tesco's.'

'Oh, she knows where all the shops are. She knows the shops all right,' said Ken.

'Then the Rye Road and past the B&Q down into Guestling, then on down Rosemary Lane. It's a very nice place, Fairlight. When you think about it, it's as pretty as anywhere.'

'How would you know? Where have you ever been?' snapped Ken.

'I've been to Wales.'

'That's all you bin to! Wales!'

'It's a very nice place, Wales.'

'There's nowhere like home.'

'Maybe for you, but this is not *my* home.'

'Thirty years you bin 'ere. You tell me then, where is your home? In the sky, is it?'

'If He'll have me!' she trilled victoriously.

'Just like Wales, is it, up there then?'

'What we deserve comes to each and every one of us in good time, Kenneth.'

'All in good time, she says,' he repeated darkly. 'There's no good time. When He calls you, He calls and that's that. But, oh no, she knows best. She knows better than Him.'

Nick checked the driving mirror, to see the woman's face. There was so much steely goodwill in her that with her mouth closed it came out through her eyes.

'June? Hey. You must have been a saint to put up with this one,' Nick said, catching her eye as they drew up at the lights.

Her eyes twinkled and she reached for Ken's hand, but his father's hand remained crabbish on his knee with hers on top of it. He looked out of the window, his face bitter.

Ken and June met on the promenade outside the White Rock in 1988, just a year after his divorce from Pearl, Nick's mother. Unabashedly, she told him that she was a woman of some means thanks to her late husband. Not more than thirty minutes later, according to Dave's version of events, the pair of them stood up with everything more or less arranged. It was a pragmatic alliance for Ken. Her money bought the next four flats that they developed and added to the company's lettings.

But June had different ideas about the marriage and, according to Dave, she set great store by the fact that Ken had bought her flowers and chocolates during their engagement and that they'd had the odd meal out. She had romantic aspirations.

She was to be disappointed. Although there was the occasional outing to The Italian Way, on the seafront, Ken made sure never to have more than a bowl of soup out and was highly critical of 'people' who were greedier than him in public, such as June.

'Tell 'em what I said on my birthday, June,' Ken said now as they went up the hill of the Old Harrow Road.

June leant forward, pleased to be called to bear witness. She looked like the sort of woman who would enjoy being in court. She looked like the sort of woman who didn't get much in the way of company. 'Seventy-eight years old and he says to me, if you please, the very first thing when he wakes, he says . . .'

'November the twenty-fifth, it was,' the old man put in.

'He says, June. He says, This is the year I'll die. I said, What a thing to say, Kenneth! Fancy waking up on your birthday and saying that . . .'

She burst into laughter. 'It tickled me! What a thing to say!'

'Same day every year, it is,' Ken grumbled. 'November twenty-fifth.'

At the traffic lights by the Sainsbury's on Sedlescombe Road North, with his arms embracing the steering wheel, and bent over it, Nick looked as if he were climbing it to get as far away from his father as possible. His focus trained on the red light, his eyes blinked like a digital clock.

The light changed.

When the car took off, the seat belts locked and pinned them to their seats.

5

The first call of the New Year was from Dave to tell Nick that their dad's sister, Auntie Pat, had died. Nick declined to go to the funeral. Dave called him again a month later, in February, at work.

'All right, mate.'

'All right, Dave.'

'Know any good hymns?'

'Good hymns? What for?'

'For a funeral.'

'What, Auntie Pat's? I thought that was done and dusted, so to speak.'

'No, Dad's.'

After a moment's silence, Dave broke out into a throaty chuckle. 'He's what you call a hymn short of a funeral service, our dad.'

Ken had become obsessed with death since Pat's passing, he said. Talk about maudlin! He'd got himself a book on Victorian services of order and he wanted the whole shebang. He'd called them up at home and got Dave's daughter, Emily, to look through her recorder book for school assemblies and play through this hymn and that hymn, and then he'd said, 'No, that's not the one,' and put the phone down. He'd had Dave's son, Matt, print off from the Internet some sort of order for non-intervention. He was in and out of the undertakers on Norman Road, leafing through funeral plans and making a nuisance of himself.

'Get this, right, he had a bit of maroon-coloured nylon ruffle

with him in his coat pocket the other day and he asked Marina what she thought of it. It was only flaming coffin lining.'

'Silly old sod.'

He seemed to have developed a crush on the funeral director on Norman Road, Dave said. 'A woman.'

'That's something.'

'Keeps on about her being a fine woman and such a shame he's met her so late in life. I think he's hoping for a discount or something. He's gone and offered her his services.'

'Christ. Has he got anything left to offer?'

'Helping out, working at the undertakers as a volunteer. Well, he's more or less retired from the business, thank Christ. Got no interest in it any more. Says property's usury, or something. I don't know. He likes his Bible these days.' He was going to church of a Sunday and talking a storm about the big man in the sky, but in truth, as Dave put it, Ken was clueless. He was like a man in a bar trying to order something he'd had as a child by explaining how it tasted. 'Oy, Nick, right, to him, right, God, it's like Dandelion and Burdock or something.'

He'd really gone downhill lately, Dave said. 'Health-wise, I mean. He's always been a bit bloody nutty, innie? But he's frail with it now.'

He'd had prostate cancer the year before, and he had the beginnings of Parkinson's now and didn't drive. Dave didn't like to ask, but he thought their father was probably having a bit of trouble with the waterworks too.

He came to the point, in his way.

'Look, you know, I mean, I know you're going to say no, and you don't have to and, I mean, why should you, know what I mean? If I was you, I wouldn't, and you could say years have passed – too many, maybe – but, you see, well, I dunno . . .'

'What?'

Would Nick consider a get-together?

'I don't think so, mate.'

Nick put him off, but Dave began to call every week and the calls become more and more burdened.

'All right?'

'Yes. You?'

'Yup. All right.'

'So, what's going on?'

'Nothing.'

'Right.'

'Busy?'

'Yup. You?'

'So-so.'

Pause.

'Well, good talking to you.'

'You too.'

'Bye then.'

'Yup. Bye, mate.'

This was how Dave prevailed upon his elder brother and the pall of the silences spoke more to Nick's heart than anything Dave could say.

Astrid was as much prurient as compassionate when it came to Nick's family. Very quickly, perhaps even before she'd thought it through, an outfit came to mind. She reasoned, pussy-bow blouse in mind, that they were so happy, nothing could touch them. You should make peace with your past, she said. After all, you've come home, haven't you?

Her eyes sparkled.

Women, he'd said to himself, were the most mysterious of mates. Where a man wants to know what's going to happen next, a woman wants to know what it means.

6

By the time they mounted the hill past Baldslow on the Ridge, there had passed several minutes of silence, punctuated here and there by a thrilled sigh from June as she recalled another part of what her husband had said on his birthday.

‘This your wife here, is it then?’ said Ken, pointing a finger at Astrid, to make it clear who he meant.

Astrid turned and met his eyes.

‘Nope. This is Astrid,’ said Nick evenly.

Ken’s chin jutted as he moved his head to see through the side window, up past the lodge into the car park of the cemetery and crematorium. ‘Nothing doing today then.’ He set his eyes on the road, scrutinizing it for potential accidents, grasping the back of Astrid’s headrest. ‘*Astrid?* What’s that – Danish, or something? Always has to be a foreigner, dunnit! Cor, that gel saw you coming – what was her name?’ He nudged June. ‘What was her name?’

‘Was it an Angelica who came with you to our wedding?’ June began. ‘Because after that there was a Lydia, wasn’t there, or something? At the christening, wore that – well, I call it mauve – frock. Lydia, that’s right, *tall*, or was it Laverne . . .?’

‘Or bleeding Shirley. Give over, woman!’

‘Annette! That’s right. I knew I’d get there in the end!’

Astrid’s fingers went limp on his knee and Nick squeezed them together with his own hand, but failed to catch her eye.

When he saw the sign for his brother’s house, he slammed on the brakes and, under-gear, the car lumbered painfully up the potholed track to ‘Longwinter Farmhouse’.

‘Bleeding long way up this drive, it is,’ said Ken. ‘You couldn’t walk it, could you, June? With your legs.’

‘I daresay I couldn’t.’

‘You wouldn’t be able to go walking about in Wales, would you?’

‘I daresay I wouldn’t.’

‘Bit posh for you here, innit, June?’ Gripped with sudden delight, Ken’s voice quavered. He sounded like George Formby.

‘I’ll manage.’

The old man gave curt instructions to his driver. ‘Pull up by the sheds there. That’s it. Stop there. Swing it in behind David’s car, that’s it. Come on! Plenty of space. Get a move on. Our dinner’ll be cold by the time you’ve got us there. Blimey. Take it easy. I say, June – I nearly lost my breakfast there.’

When Nick had helped June down and set her in motion like a clockwork penguin towards the house, he went round to his father’s door.

Ken lay a hand on each of his shoulders as he got down. Nick had to steel himself not to flinch from the unwelcome touch. His father’s eyes were a thin blue, paler than Nick recalled. He spoke in a fervent whisper. ‘Remember your mother and me, how happy we was when you was a nipper? Remember how she used to have a turn if you caught her singing . . .? She used to raise her fists to me when I come up behind her, she was a bit ’andy that way, wa’n’t she? She was what you call an honest woman, though, wa’n’t she? Wa’n’t she?’

Nick glanced towards the house and saw June standing on the doorstep in her triangular coat, holding her bag with two hands, waiting.

‘Just a minute now, give your old man a minute of your time. I know you want to get in that house and get away from me. But give your old man a second now. It’s bin a long time, ’annit?’

He tightened his grip on Nick's shoulders. 'Listen now, son. I'm going to die.'

'We're all going to die.'

'Yes, but the odds is getting shorter for me though, a'n't they?' He rolled his eyes and tutted. 'Now look, I might not of met my maker as yet, but I have met *reality*.' He said the word as though it were holy. He meant a lot by it. He'd always had his favourite words. His father was not stupid; if he had a good thought, he hung on to it. 'Do you know what I mean? *Reality*. What I done wrong. What I bin.'

It was difficult. His father was holding him there, telling him to stay there, to heed him, and yet all they had between them was the air they were breathing. He'd long cultivated different tastes and different habits deliberately so as not to resemble him.

'I'm your father. What's in me, is in you. Wherever I'm heading, you're right behind me. You're walking in my footsteps. 'Cause I'm your father and you're my son. And no one can change that.'

Astrid said to him once, with the laundry folded, supper cleared and Laura in bed, when they sat down for a glass of wine, that it's only when you have children yourself that you can really love your parents properly. You see all the little things that took it out of them, the hot-water bottle, the clean sheets, all the things they did even though they were aching to sit down, even though they didn't get thanks for the good things, only the blame for the bad things. They'd laughed at the injustice served by Laura who, when finding the joke shop by the station had closed down, wailed at her mother: 'That's *your* fault!'

'Kids blame their parents for everything. It's only when you have kids yourself that you stop being a kid,' she'd said, her face the picture of innocence.

'We're blood,' the old man insisted. 'You and me. We're father and son. Like it nor not.'

'All right,' Nick conceded. 'All right, but let's talk about it inside.'

'Thank you,' Ken said, and he patted his son's arm and looked towards the house, his expression both conciliatory and keen.



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