The Umbrella

The minute they arrived at the adventure playground, Roger's two sons charged up a long ramp and were soon clinging to the steel netting that hung from a high beam. Satisfied that it would take them some time to extricate themselves, Roger sat on a bench and turned to the sports section of his newspaper. He had always found it relaxing to read reports of football matches he had not seen.

Then it started to rain.

His sons, aged four and five and a half, had refused to put on their coats when he picked them up from the au pair half an hour before. Coats made them look 'fat', they claimed, and Roger had had to carry them under his arm.

The older boy was dressed in a thin, tight-fitting green outfit and a cardboard cap with a feather in it: he was either Robin Hood or Peter Pan. The younger wore a plastic holster with two silver guns, a plastic dagger and a sword, blue wellington boots, jeans with the fly open, and a chequered neckerchief which he pulled over his mouth. 'Cowboys don't wear raincoats,' he said, through a mouthful of cloth.

The boys frequently refused Roger's commands, though he could not say that their stubbornness and pluck annoyed him.

It did, however, cause him trouble with his wife, from whom he had separated a year previously. Only that morning she had said on the phone, 'You are a weak and inadequate disciplinarian. You only want their favour.'

For as long as he could, Roger pretended it was not raining, but when his newspaper began to go soggy and everyone else had left the playground, he called the boys over.

'Damn this rain,' he said, as he hustled them into their hooded yellow raincoats.

'Don't swear,' said Eddie, the younger boy. 'Women think it's naughty.'

'Sorry.' Roger laughed. 'I was thinking I should have got a raincoat as well as the suit.'

'You do need a lovely raincoat, Daddy,' said Oliver, the oldest.

'My friend would have given me a raincoat, but I liked the suit more.'

He had picked up the chocolate-coloured suit from the shop that morning. Since the early seventies, that most extravagant of periods, Roger had fancied himself as a restrained but amateur dandy. One of his best friends was a clothes designer with shops in Europe and Japan. A few years ago this friend, amused by Roger's interest in his business, had invited Roger, during a fashion show at the British Embassy in Paris, to parade on the catwalk in front of the fashion press, alongside younger and taller men. Roger's friend had given him the chocolate suit for his fortieth birthday, and had insisted he wear it with a blue silk shirt. Roger's sons liked to sleep in their

newly acquired clothes, and he understood their enthusiasm. He would not normally wear a suit for the park, but that evening he was going to a publishing party, and then on to his third date with a woman he had been introduced to at a friend's house; a woman he liked.

Roger took the boys' hands and pulled them along.

'We'd better go to the teahouse,' he said. 'I hope I don't ruin my shoes.'

'They're beautiful,' said Oliver.

Eddie stopped to bend down and rub his father's loafers. 'I'll put my hands over your shoes while you walk,' he said.

'That might slow us down a little,' Roger said. 'Run for it, mates!'

He picked Eddie up, holding him flat in his arms like a baby, with his muddy boots pointing outwards. The three of them hurried across the darkening park.

The teahouse was a wide, low-ceilinged shed, warm, brightly lit and decorated in the black and white colours and flags of Newcastle United. The coffee was good and they had all the newspapers. The place was crowded but Roger spotted a table and sent Oliver over to sit at it.

Roger recognised the mother of a boy in Eddie's nursery, as well as several nannies and au pairs, who seemed to congregate in some part of this park on most days. Three or four of them had come to his house with their charges, when he lived with his wife. If they seemed reticent with him, he doubted whether this was because they were young and simple, but

rather that they saw him as an employer, as the boss.

He was aware that he was the only man in the teahouse. The men he ran into with children were either younger than him, or older, on their second families. He wished his children were older, and understood more; he should have had them earlier. He'd both enjoyed and wasted the years before they were born; it had been a long, dissatisfied ease.

A girl in the queue turned to him.

'Thinking again?' she said.

He recognised her voice but had not brought his glasses.

'Hello,' he said at last. He called to Eddie, 'Hey, it's Lindy.' Eddie covered his face with both hands. 'You remember her giving you a bath and washing your hair.'

'Hey, cowboy,' she said.

Lindy had looked after both children when Eddie was born and lived in the house until precipitately deciding to leave. She had told them she wanted to do something else but, instead, had gone to work for a couple nearby.

The last time Roger had run into Lindy, he had overheard her imitating his sons' accents and laughing. They were 'posh'. He had been shocked by how early these notions of 'class' started.

'Haven't seen you for a while,' she said.

'I've been travelling.'

'Where to?'

'Belfast, Cape Town, Sarajevo.'

'Lovely,' she said.

'I'm off to the States next week,' he said.

'Doing what?'

'Lecturing on human rights. On the development of the notion of the individual . . . of the idea of the separate self.' He wanted to say something about Shakespeare and Montaigne, as he had been thinking about them, but realised she would refuse to be curious about the subject. 'And on the idea of human rights in the post-war period. All of that kind of thing. I hope there's going to be a TV series.'

She said, 'I came back from the pub and turned on the TV last week, and there you were, criticising some clever book or other. I didn't understand it.'

'Right.'

He had always been polite to her, even when he had been unable to wake her up because she had been drinking the previous night. She had seen him unshaven, and in his pyjamas at four in the morning; she had opened doors and found him and his wife abusing one another behind them; she had been at their rented villa in Assisi when his wife tore the cloth from the table with four bowls of pasta on it. She must have heard energetic reconciliations.

'I hope it goes well,' she said.

'Thank you.'

The boys ordered big doughnuts and juice. The juice spilled over the table and the doughnuts were smeared round their mouths. Roger had to hold his cappuccino out in front of him to stop the boys sticking their grimy fingers in the froth and

sucking the chocolate from them. To his relief they joined Lindy's child.

Roger began a conversation with a woman at the next table who had complimented him on his sons. She told him she wanted to write a newspaper article on how difficult some people found it to say 'No' to children. You could not charm them, she maintained, as you could people at a cocktail party; they had to know what the limits were. He did not like the idea that she had turned disciplining her child into a manifesto, but he would ask for her phone number before he left. For more than a year he had not gone out socially, fearing that people would see his anguish.

He was extracting his notebook and pen when Lindy called him. He turned round. His sons were at the far end of the teahouse, rolling on top of another, larger, boy, who was wailing, 'He's biting me!'

Eddie did bite; he kicked too.

'Boys!' Roger called.

He hurried them into their coats again, whispering furiously for them to shut up. He said goodbye to the woman without getting her phone number. He did not want to appear lecherous.

He had always been proud of the idea that he was a good man who treated people fairly. He did not want to impose himself. The world would be a better place if people considered their actions. Perhaps he had put himself on a pedestal. 'You have a high reputation – with yourself!' a friend had

said. Everyone was entitled to some pride and vanity. However, this whole business with his wife had stripped him of his moral certainties. There was no just or objective way to resolve competing claims: those of freedom – his freedom – to live and develop as he liked, against the right of his family to have his dependable presence. But no amount of conscience or morality would make him go back. He had not missed his wife for a moment.

As they were leaving the park, Eddie tore some daffodils from a flowerbed and stuffed them in his pocket. 'For Mummy,' he explained.

The house was a ten-minute walk away. Holding hands, they ran home through the rain. His wife would be back soon, and he would be off.

It was not until he had taken out his key that he remembered his wife had changed the lock last week. What she had done was illegal: he owned the house; but he had laughed at the idea she thought he would intrude, when he wanted to be as far away as possible.

He told the boys they would have to wait. They sheltered in the little porch where water dripped on their heads. The boys soon tired of standing with him and refused to sing the songs he started. They pulled their hoods down and chased one another up and down the path.

It was dark. People were coming home from work.

The next-door neighbour passed by. 'Locked out?' he said.

''Fraid so.'

Oliver said, 'Daddy, why can't we go in and watch the cartoons?'

'It's only me she's locked out,' he said. 'Not you. But you are, of course, with me.'

'Why has she locked us out?'

'Why don't you ask her?' he said.

His wife confused and frightened him. But he would greet her civilly, send the children into the house and say goodbye. It was, however, difficult to get cabs in the area; impossible at this time and in this weather. It was a twenty-minute walk to the tube station, across a dripping park where alcoholics and junkies gathered under the trees. His shoes, already wet, would be filthy. At the party he would have to try and remove the worst of the mud in the toilet.

After the violence of separation he had expected a diminishment of interest and of loathing, on her part. He himself had survived the worst of it and anticipated a quietness. Kind indifference had come to seem an important blessing. But as well as refusing to divorce him, she sent him lawyers' letters about the most trivial matters. One letter, he recalled, was entirely about a cheese sandwich he had made for himself when visiting the children. He was ordered to bring his own food in future. He thought of his wife years ago, laughing and putting out her tongue with his semen on it.

'Hey there,' she said, coming up the path.

'Mummy!' they called.

'Look at them,' he said. 'They're soaked through.'

'Oh dear.'

She unlocked the door and the children ran into the hall. She nodded at him. 'You're going out.'

'Sorry?'

'You've got a suit on.'

He stepped into the hall. 'Yes. A little party.'

He glanced into his former study, where his books were packed in boxes on the floor. He had, as yet, nowhere to take them. Beside them were a pair of men's black shoes he had not seen before.

She said to the children, 'I'll get your tea.' To him she said, 'You haven't given them anything to eat, have you?'

'Doughnuts,' said Eddie. 'I had chocolate.'

'I had jam,' said Oliver.

She said, 'You let them eat that rubbish?'

Eddie pushed the crushed flowers at her. 'There you are, Mummy.'

'You must not take flowers from the park,' she said. 'They are for everyone.'

'Fuck, fuck, fuck,' said Eddie suddenly, with his hand over his mouth.

'Shut up! People don't like it!' said Oliver, and hit Eddie, who started to cry.

'Listen to him,' she said to Roger. 'You've taught them to use filthy language. You are really hopeless.'

'So are you,' he said.

In the past few months, preparing his lectures, he had vis-

ited some disorderly and murderous places. The hatred he witnessed puzzled him still. It was atavistic but abstract; mostly the people did not know one another. It had made him aware of how people clung to their antipathies, and used them to maintain an important distance, but in the end he failed to understand why this was. After all the political analysis and talk of rights, he had concluded that people had to grasp the necessity of loving one another; and if that was too much, they had to let one another alone. When this still seemed inadequate and banal, he suspected he was on the wrong path, that he was trying to say something about his own difficulties in the guise of intellectual discourse. Why could he not find a more direct method? He had, in fact, considered writing a novel. He had plenty to say, but could not afford the time, unpaid.

He looked out at the street. 'It's raining quite hard.'

'It's not too bad now.'

He said, 'You haven't got an umbrella, have you?'

'An umbrella?'

He was becoming impatient. 'Yes. An umbrella. You know, you hold it over your head.'

She sighed and went back into the house. He presumed she was opening the door to the airing cupboard in the bathroom.

He was standing in the porch, ready to go. She returned empty handed.

'No. No umbrella,' she said.

He said, 'There were three there last week.'

'Maybe there were.'

'Are there not still three umbrellas there?'

'Maybe there are,' she said.

'Give me one.'

'No.'

'Sorry?'

'I'm not giving you one,' she said. 'If there were a thousand umbrellas there I would not give you one.'

He had noticed how persistent his children were; they asked, pleaded, threatened and screamed, until he yielded.

He said, 'They are my umbrellas.'

'No,' she repeated.

'How petty you've become.'

'Didn't I give you everything?'

He cleared his throat. 'Everything but love.'

'I did give you that, actually.' She said, 'I've rung my friend. He's on his way.'

He said, 'I don't care. Just give me an umbrella.'

She shook her head. She went to shut the door. He put his foot out and she banged the door against his leg. He wanted to rub his shin but could not give her the pleasure.

He said, 'Let's try and be rational.'

He had hated before, his parents and brother, at certain times. But it was a fury, not a deep, intellectual and emotional hatred like this. He had had psychotherapy; he took tranquillisers, but still he wanted to pulverise his wife. None of the ideas he had about life would make this feeling go away.

'You used to find the rain "refreshing",' she sneered.

'It has come to this,' he said.

'Here we are then,' she said. 'Don't start crying about it.'

He pushed the door. 'I'll get the umbrella.'

She pushed the door back at him. 'You cannot come in.'

'It is my house.'

'Not without prior arrangement.'

'We arranged it,' he said.

'The arrangement's off.'

He pushed her.

'Are you assaulting me?' she said.

He looked outside. An alcoholic woman he had had to remove from the front step on several occasions was standing at the end of the path holding a can of lager.

'I'm watching you,' she shouted. 'If you touch her you are reported!'

'Watch on!' he shouted back.

He pushed into the house. He placed his hand on his wife's chest and forced her against the wall. She cried out. She did bang her head, but it was, in football jargon, a 'dive'. The children ran at his legs. He pushed them away.

He went to the airing cupboard, seized an umbrella and made his way to the front door.

As he passed her she snatched it. Her strength surprised him, but he yanked the umbrella back and went to move away. She raised her hand. He thought she would slap him. It would be the first time. But she made a fist. As she punched

him in the face she continued to look at him.

He had not been hit since he left school. He had forgotten the physical shock and then the disbelief, the shattering of the feeling that the world was a safe place.

The boys were screaming. Roger had dropped the umbrella. His mouth throbbed; his lip was bleeding. He must have staggered and lost his balance for she was able to push him outside.

He heard the door slam behind him. He could hear the children crying. He walked away, past the alcoholic woman still standing at the end of the path. He turned to look at the lighted house. When they had calmed down, the children would have their bath and get ready for bed. They liked being read to. It was a part of the day he had always enjoyed.

He turned his collar up but knew he would get soaked. He wiped his mouth with his hand. She had landed him quite a hit. He would not be able to find out until later whether it would show. If it did, it would cause interest and amusement at the party, but not to him; not with a date to go to.

He stood in a doorway watching the people hurry past. His trouser legs stuck to his skin. It would not stop raining for a long time. He could not just stand in the same place for hours. The thing to do was not to mind. He started out then, across the Green, in the dark, wet through, but moving forward.

Morning in the Bowl of Night

It had been snowing.

He got to the house, looked at his watch, saw he was late, and hurried on to a pub he knew at the end of the street. He pushed the door and a barking Alsatian on a chain leapt at him. Young children, one of them badly bruised, chased one another across the slush-wet floor, tripping over the adults' feet. The jukebox was loud, as were the TV and the drinkers' voices. He hadn't been in here for months yet he recognised the same people.

He was backing out when the barman shouted, 'Hey, my man Alan. Alan, where you been?' and started to pull him a pint.

Alan took a seat at the bar, lit a cigarette and drank off half his glass. If he finished quickly he might get another pint in him. It would mean he had no money but why would he need money tonight? The last time he had attended a school nativity play and carol service he had been fourteen, and his best friend's father had turned up so soaked in alcohol that he didn't realise his tie had been dunked in red wine and was still dripping. The boys pointed and laughed at him, and his son had been ashamed.