

"I'd no idea your children were so grown-up," she said, as soon as they were clear of the house.

"We've been married twenty-three years. We started a family straight away. Marjorie was only too glad to give up work."

"What work was that ?"

"Typing pool."

"Ah."

"Marje is no intellectual," said Vic, "as you probably noticed. She left school without any O-Levels."

"Does that bother her ?"

"No. It bothers me, sometimes."

"Why don't you encourage her to do a course of some kind, then ?"

"What O-Levels ? Marjorie ? At her time of life ?" His laughter rang out in the cold air, harsher than he had intended.

"It doesn't have to be O-Level. There are extra-mural courses she could do, or WEA. And the Open University has courses you can follow without doing the examinations."

"Marjorie wouldn't be up to it," said Vic.

"Only because you've made her think she isn't," said Robyn.

"Rubbish ! Marjorie's perfectly content. She has a nice house, with an en suite bathroom and four lavatories, and enough money to go shopping whenever she feels like it."

"I think that's an unbelievably patronising thing to say about your own wife," said Robyn Penrose.

They walked on in silence for a while, as Vic considered how to respond to this rebuke. He decided to let it pass.

He led Robyn by an aimless route through the quieter residential streets. It was a cold, misty afternoon, with a low red sun glowing through the branches of the leafless trees. They met few other people : a lone jogger, a couple with a dog, some disconsolate-looking students waiting at a bus stop. At every intersection, marking the nocturnal passage of marauding vandals, uprooted traffic bollards lay on their sides, with all their wiring exposed.

"It's my kids who should be worrying about getting qualifications," said Vic.

"Raymond dropped out of university. last year. Failed his first-year exams and the resits."

"What was he doing ?"

"Electrical Engineering. He's clever enough, but never did any work. And Sandra says she doesn't want to go to university. Wants to be a hairdresser, or "hairstylist", as they call it."

"Of course, hair is very important in youth culture today," Robyn mused, "It's a form of self-expression. "It's almost a new form of art."

"It's not a serious job, though, is it ? You wouldn't do it for a living."

"There are lots of things I wouldn't do. I wouldn't work in a factory. I wouldn't work in a bank. I wouldn't be a housewife. When I think of most people's lives, especially women's lives, I don't know how they bear it."

"Someone has to do those jobs", said Vic.

"That's what's so depressing."

"But Sandra could do something better. I wish you'd talk to her, about going to university."

David LODGE, Nice Work.

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