

AND THEN

And then she went and stayed with her mother after a nasty scene in which he locked her out and screamed at her and said he'd kill the budgie. She ran to the phone box and rang the police and they said he can't lock you out, it's your house too. She said tell him that – which they came and did and he said she could come in and get what she wanted, and make sure you take the bloody budgie will you. That was about all she wanted by now, needing badly to go home to mum who loved her and she brought blue budgie out because she didn't trust him with it – with good reason for his feelings were murderous towards the little thing. She had lavished all her attention on it and none for him, he felt. Had never said it till cops said why don't you two sit down and talk this thing out – no need to scream and lock doors – surely two adults can sort it out. And he replied the only chance of that is with that bloody thing out of the way – meaning her feathered friend, his enemy.

So home to mum with budgie under wing and hating him. Mum was sympathetic, because her daughter, but liked Rick a lot and said,

– I think you're being a bit silly dear – you can't just walk out when things get a bit rough – marriage is hard work, you know. Of course you can stay here as long as you like but really, don't you think you should think of him a little bit – he's such a nice boy – you could do a lot worse.

And also things like,

– Carol, would you mind putting that budgie in its cage where it belongs – its shitting on my settee. You know I think Rick might have had a point, and really Carol, which is more important, your marriage, or that bird, now darling, really? Surely you could work something out – like keep the budgie out of his way – can't you put it in its cage when Rick gets home. It is a bird after all, and could be in its cage, well, some of the time, don't you think?

And on and on in daily doses till Carol began to crave for her own house and mother's voice to stop.

So home to Rick so sick of canned food and damp socks on the heater and sour milk in the fridge and bed alone. He was glad to see his little girl return and tried not to notice the simultaneous return of shitheap the budgie, and mmmmm, in thrill of first night back as one, they did the trick, look mum I'm pregnant, at last, again. And such care this time I will not lose it. Which she didn't. Cossetted herself and crocheted instead of standing kitchen handing lifting heavy pots and hauling crates until so weary and collapsed no foetus could accept and one had given up the ghost and slid away before.

A child a child is born, oh joy and trouble in the camp soon follows as all that comes is transfer of affection, bird to child. Now Rick's left out again and baby's in. His baby too, which he had loved so much when first he saw and recognised himself in eyes and mouth and yes, in nose as well. All wondrously passed on from him to son of a gun, goo.

Carol, please talk to me, please touch me, please cuddle me, please do. The budgie not happy either but sounds distress more clearly and is removed to back porch for its cries while Rick in lounge sits slumped. He stares at horses leaping on the walls and hears the suckling sounds at breast and doesn't ask again if she is better yet.

– The tearing, Rick – it takes a while.

And she is closed to him and gazes at the child.

– I've got a sore throat Carol, got a headache too. I think I'm coming down with something bad. Carol?

– Well see a doctor Rick, for heaven's sake. Don't sit and moan. And if you really feel that bad, well go to bed. Look, tell you what, you take the baby's room and he'll come in with me. We won't disturb you then and you can rest and get yourself some sleep, it's what you need. No, don't come near the baby darling, don't want him to catch your nasty cold, now do we, Rick, why don't you go to bed?

– I'm not that sick for Christ sake Carol. I'll just take a Disprin, something for my head.

Get rid of that baby, Carol, screams his mind while where's the fuckin Disprin? screams his mouth.

– Don't swear, Rick, please, in front of him. It's on the second shelf, I think.

– Going for a walk, Carol – need some air.

– Well that's a bit silly, chilly out and with a cold.

– I haven't got a cold. I'll be back soon.

– Well Rick, g'day mate, thought you must have given up the pub. Heard you're a dad an all. You'll have to watch it now, you know – think they've got a reason then, for keeping you at home. C'mon let's have a drink for the proud dad – boy or girl was it – boy, good on ya Rick. Well here's cheers. A son. You'll be glad of that I reckon, though, to tell you the truth, doesn't make much difference yet you know. Just little heaps of squalling shit and piss, now really, aren't they Rick?

Rick doesn't say, but no he's not, he's beautiful and soft and I would love to stay and play and hold but come out not to watch the love between them grow, it hurts. I'm like the gooseberry goose gooseberry, not needed there, and says,

– You're dead right mate. Drink up and have another mate. C'mon its time I had a session. Cheers.

When stumbling drunk he finally gets home he hears,

– My God you're drunk Rick. Out all night and then come home like this. My God.

– What difference, Carol, does it make, I'd like to know, if drunk or not or here or not. Makes none.

– You're drunk and talking rot. Just lucky he's asleep and can't see you like this, that's all.

– Whaddya mean see me – wouldn't know who I am, he wouldn't have a clue.

– Oh don't be silly Rick. Of course he does and he can tell when something's wrong, you mark my word, and I don't want him upset – so if you must get drunk in future stay out till you're not. Thank you very much. Goodnight.

– And thank you Carol, thank you very much for making me feel . . .

– Shut up Rick. You'll wake him up. Shut up.

– Now hold the baby Rick. I just want one of you with Tim, like that. Oh really, aren't men hopeless. Rick, just hold

him up like this. Put one arm round, and one behind his neck. Oh, Rick, you look so funny. As if you'd never held a baby in your life. Well now, that's better, Timmie smile for Nan, come on darling smile. And you too Rick, come on. Of course he squirms, he's not a doll you know, my God men make me laugh, I'll bet you've never changed his nappy yet – he hasn't Carol, has he – no, I knew, they're all the same these men, now there, that's it. And one for luck. Big smile. All right Rick, hand him over now. Come on to Nanny, darling, Nanny understands. Oh Rick, you make me laugh, you're all the same you men. You really are.