

Duncan Richardson

FOSSILS

The man and woman were sitting on a bench by the sea front, huddled together against the wind, sticky with salt. Sea gulls hovered over the morning walkers, waiting for scraps. Kids ran, glorying in the power to make the sleek grey birds fly up again when they landed. He had almost heard the pre-echo of her words.

“It wouldn’t be too bad, would it?”

“What?” To delay the moment.

“You know.” She looked at the kids to prove it.

“No.”

She let out a hiss of exasperation. “It’ll be too late soon. Before long. I’ll be too old. I hate to think of that.”

“So do I.”

She glanced up. “Really?”

“Kids, I mean. I hate to think of kids.” He grinned. The corners of her mouth drooped and he thought she looked like a child herself.

“Would you like an ice cream?” he said.

She sat there, exuding hate and frustration. “Fuck off,” she whispered and strode away towards the sea.

He left enough time for her anger to cool, then set off slowly, catching her up when they were almost back at the car.

“Let’s go for a drive along the cliffs,” he said.

“Over the cliffs,” she added quietly.

“Okay.” He smiled.

When they came upon the inlet his heart jumped as he saw the platform of rock jutting out into the ocean. She did not object when he pulled over. The waves must have satisfied her in some way. The silence of the car grew until he clicked open the door, took a screwdriver and wrench from the boot and walked down onto the pitted rock surface, letting the waves hiss into his ears. After about five minutes, she followed.

The breakers were coming in slowly and curling themselves against the cliff. The man crouched down and picked up a rock.

“What are you doing?” Her voice came from behind.

"Looking for fossils." He turned the rock over and tried to prise it apart with his fingers. Then he struck it with the wrench. Still nothing happened.

"Re-living your childhood," she said, with a note of triumph. He wondered where it came from, then thought for a moment. Was it true? Or was he just pretending? He wanted to fight against the idea that he had not grown up, whether she had meant that or not.

"No," he said, straightening up. "Just looking."

They stood there with the rock between them. She folded her arms to keep out the cold air.

"It's because of what I said about having kids, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I mean no. No that's not why I'm digging around here. But yes, that's why I'm shifted off."

"Why?" She wanted to say more, but everything she planned in her mind trailed away. Wind tugged at her hair. Spray was being blown back over the cliff and stinging her eyes.

"Don't cry," he said, glancing up.

"Why not? It's bloody pathetic. We're bloody pathetic."

He bit his lip.

"Now who looks like a child?" she said.

"Did I say you did?"

"No, but you meant it. Ice cream!"

He turned away and allowed the wind blown foam to wrap itself around him, connecting them both while keeping them separate, then slouched over to an outcrop of rock. The layers were visible in cream and russet bands. Some protruded in fingers.

He tapped against one of them. The tip fell away, leaving a jagged edge. Something dark showed on the surface that was visible. She stood beside him now.

"Ah," he said

She screwed up her eyes to keep out the wind and tried to see. "What is it?"

"Not sure." He hit the covering piece gently with the wrench, then levered the screwdriver under a flake of stone. With a slight tearing sound, it came off in his hand, revealing the rest of the shape.

"What is it?" she said. "Is it a fossil?"

He stared at it, brown and blotchy, wanting it to take shape and suggest life. He could not force it. It only reminded him of an inkblot.

"But not one I can see pictures in," he said.

"What?"

“Nothing.” He put the rock down. “Let’s go.” He started walking back to the car. She stood by the cliff. “Are you coming?” he asked.

She nodded. He went on. Very carefully, she bent down, picked up the rock and put it in her pocket. Then she turned her back on the waves and stepped up the slope to the car.