

Fairy-tales and legends often tell of a knight who suddenly catches sight of a rare bird of which he then sets off in pursuit, since in the beginning it seemed quite close, but then it flies off again, until at last night falls. The knight is separated from his companions and lost in the wilderness in which he now finds himself.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

The man who has criss-crossed every ocean has merely criss-crossed the monotony of his self. I have criss-crossed more seas than any man alive. I have seen more mountains than most on this earth. I have been through more cities than exist and over the mighty rivers of non-existent worlds which flowed, absolute, under my contemplative gaze . . .

Did I leave? I could not swear to it. I found myself in other lands, in other ports, passing through towns which were not this one, even if neither this one nor that one were towns at all . . .

FERNANDO PESSOA

The search began when Walker met Rachel.

He had been hung-over most of the day and intended taking it easy that night. Then, just as he was beginning to feel better, his brother dropped by, kitted out in an off-white tuxedo, telling Walker to get changed and get a move on, he was coming to Charles and Margot Browning's party.

'I haven't got a tux.'

'There's one in the car. Come on, we're late. Let's go.'

They were annual events, these parties, renowned throughout the bay area for the extravagant array of drink and food, the wealth of those invited to consume it. Walker had never been before and apart from his brother – who, it emerged in the car, had come by the invite indirectly – he knew no one. He stood drinking, squeezed into a wine-stained tuxedo, wondering why he had come. Photographers were prowling around, snapping anyone who possessed the distinctive complexion of wealth. No one had any interest in photographing Walker but several times he was caught in the blurred background of a smiling society couple.

He had been there an hour, getting loaded, watching

people talk, when a woman nudged into him and spilt half his drink. His age, a little older maybe. Brown hair piled up, earrings, no lipstick. A dress that reached to the floor.

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

Walker dabbed at his jacket.

‘That’s OK.’

She was laughing. ‘It looks a little on the tight side.’

‘That’s how they’re being worn this year.’

‘A dinner jacket and surgical truss in one. Very stylish.’

‘I like to think so.’

She said her name, reached out a bare arm. Her bracelets chimed together as he shook her hand.

‘It’s a terrible party, isn’t it?’

In the first moments of meeting someone we’re attracted to we grope towards an agreement on something, however small – even if it is only agreeing to have a drink – and this declaration of Rachel’s was enough to establish a treaty between them. They bitched about the party, the people there. Watched one of the photographers coax a grin and kiss from a rival pair of celebrities.

‘It’s funny,’ she said. ‘Nothing means anything any more unless you’re photographed doing it. We need photos to prove to everyone else we exist, to remind ourselves. How’s that for an unoriginal thought? What were we talking about? I forget.’

‘Photos,’ said Walker. ‘Pictures.’

‘Yes. You know when you’re on holiday and you take pictures? You always wait until you’re back home before getting them developed, even if you have time. Otherwise they’re just postcards. But if you wait till you’re back home they’re

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different. Then it's like that story of dreaming of a garden where you pick a flower – and you wake up with petals in your bed.'

She was high or drunk, Walker guessed. 'I never take a camera,' he said dully.

'So the dream goes on, even after you've woken up. Either that or you don't wake up at all.' She took a sip of red wine, holding the glass in both hands – a gesture Walker had always been a sucker for.

'Something like that,' he said. Seeing his glass was empty, Rachel motioned to him to take hers. As she did so a photographer crouched down and snapped them. Walker took a gulp of Rachel's wine. A guy in a red-faced blazer came over and kissed her, chatted and drifted away, leaving them alone again. Moments later a woman came up and kissed Rachel on the cheek, introduced her to a man with a millionaire haircut who in turn presented another man to her. Suddenly there was a lot of kissing going on. Eventually Walker got included in the swelling round of introductions. Shook hands, repeated his name for those who didn't quite catch it. He finished Rachel's wine, mumbled 'Excuse me' to no one in particular and headed for the bar.

Rachel was surrounded by a laughing group of people when he got back. He handed her a full glass and she smiled thanks. The way she laughed, looked at him. Walker wondered if he would go to bed with her, not now, not tonight, sometime. The possibility hovered beyond the edge of what they said which was nothing, just words and smiles swapped. He shuffled on the periphery of the group and moved off, bumping into someone as he did so.

‘Sorry!’ It was the kind of party where people were constantly stepping into each other and apologizing. On this occasion, though, the guy Walker had collided with stood there and stared him down as if they were in a waterfront bar where an encounter like this could lead to a broken-bottle fight. A camera flashed whitely behind the guy’s head, silhouetting him briefly. Now he was looking over Walker’s shoulder; Walker glanced around, instinctively following his gaze, thought he glimpsed Rachel looking away, startled.

Walker moved off, shoving gently through the crowd. Lifted a bottle from a waiter’s tray and resumed his solitary drinking. He was out on the terrace, looking down at the glinting waters of the bay, when he felt a touch on his arm. He turned round and saw her.

‘I thought I’d never find you,’ she said. ‘It’s so crowded.’

‘I’m glad you did.’

‘I’m sorry, I got cornered. Is there anything more boring than a party?’

‘Hundreds of things – but at a party it’s more concentrated. And it happens on a bigger scale.’

She smiled quickly, ‘I have to leave. I wanted to say good-bye.’

‘That’s a shame.’

‘Yes. I would like to have talked to you more.’

‘Maybe I’ll call you.’

‘It’s better if I call you.’

‘Yes?’

‘Are you in the book?’

‘Yes. It’s under B: B for Brush-off.’

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'I'm not giving you the brush-off – it's a weird expression, isn't it? Honestly.'

'OK.'

'I'll call you.'

With that she was gone, leaving Walker in the mothy darkness, an empty bottle in his hand.

Two days later she turned up at his apartment. A fresh, clear morning. He had just got back from the gym and was sitting on the patio, reading the paper, when the doorbell rang. The mailman, he guessed.

She was wearing jeans, a sweat-shirt. Her hair, neatly pinned up at the party, was all over the place today. In her hand she held a pile of letters.

'Your mail,' she smiled.

Walker looked over her shoulder and waved at the retreating figure of the mailman, smiling and pleased now that the good weather was here.

Walker smiled too. Everyone was smiling. 'Come in.'

'Is this a bad time?'

'It's a perfect time.'

Walker fixed a jug of orange and she followed him out to the patio. They sat in creaking wicker chairs, filling pauses with the swirl and chink of ice. He tore open one of the letters she had handed him and glanced at the contents. Sunlight bounced white off the painted concrete. Walker squinted while she put on a pair of sunglasses. At every moment her face seemed on the brink of answering 'No' to the question 'Is she beautiful?' But the answer never quite came and the longer he looked the more uncertain he became.

Later, he saw he had got it wrong all the time: her beauty lay precisely in this aura of uncertainty. Beside it the beauty of models and actresses seemed banal. At the time, watching her finger a strand of hair from her face, he was aware only of the way his eyes lingered on her as they waited for each other to speak.

'I think you said the other night that you're not working just now,' she said at last.

'That's right.'

'So what do you do all day?'

'You know, the time passes.'

'Pleasantly?'

'It passes.'

'What did you do before this?'

'Various things. Drifted from one thing to another. Whatever came up.'

'You've never had a job?'

'Off and on. Off mainly.'

'And what do you do for money?'

'Are you a social worker?'

'I'm just interested.'

'Odds and ends. My brother's renovating a house just north of the bay. I work for him now and again. Maybe you met him the other night?'

She shook her head, took a sip of orange. The imprint of her lip appeared on the cold glass, fading as he noticed it.

'You're being too modest. I think you've had a more interesting life than you let on.'

'Oh?'

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'Yes. I think you've been involved in quite a few interesting things. Not all of them quite legal.'

'If you say so.'

'You're trying very hard to be enigmatic, Mr Walker.'

'I know, I'm putting everything into it.'

'Perhaps it would be a help if you borrowed these,' she said, handing him her sunglasses.

'That's much better,' Walker said when he had put them on.

'They suit you.'

'Thank you.'

'How was prison?'

'It was great. Bit cloudy a couple of days but the rest of the time it was terrific,' he said and chucked the remains of his drink at her. 'Now fuck off out of my house.'

She brushed the melting ice from her lap, surprised but unruffled.

'Dramatic,' she said, only the faintest hint of nervousness in her voice. Seeing him smile she went on, 'Do you really want me to leave?'

Walker was watching her carefully from behind the sunglasses. Her knees parted, almost imperceptibly, a quarter of an inch, no more, as she spoke. With his empty glass he gestured for her to continue.

'For a while you worked as a tracker.'

'Not exactly.'

'You found Orlando Brandon.'

'I came across him. By accident.'

'A very fortunate accident. For you, at any rate. People had been looking for him for three years. The buy-out must have been considerable.'

Walker waited, studying her.

'Not so fortunate for him, however,' she said. 'If I remember rightly, he was dead three weeks after you found him.'

'Four.'

She dug around in her bag and found another pair of sunglasses. Blew dust off the lenses.

'How many pairs do you have in there?'

'This is the last,' she said, her eyes disappearing behind the shades. 'I would like you to find someone for me.'

'That's illegal. Besides, like I told you, I was never a tracker.'

'I appreciate that, Mr Walker, but I will, if I may, explain myself a little further.'

Walker shrugged. 'What's all this Mr Walker bit?'

'The situation seems to demand it,' she smiled. 'Can I continue?'

Walker nodded. Shrugs, nods, smiles.

'Have you heard of Alexander Malory?'

'No. Should I have done?'

'There have been a number of articles in the paper about him.'

'I don't read the papers.'

'Well, he's disappeared.'

'A lot of people disappear. Or try to.'

'Hence the need for trackers.'

'What's your interest in him?'

'I am his wife.' On cue she removed her sunglasses. As an expression of frankness it was so perfectly executed that Walker suspected it might not be genuine. 'We're separated.'

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That was years ago. He was very generous. Since then, however, certain irregularities in his dealings have come up. The police are interested in him. They don't yet have a warrant for him but they will have one soon. There are other people interested in him also. To speak plainly, they want to kill him. It's possible he is trying to evade them but he moves around a lot anyway. It's equally possible he is just off travelling. Earlier I said he had disappeared – in a way he is in a state of constant disappearance.'

'And?'

'And I want to find him. For two reasons. If he is simply travelling, I would like to warn him – as I say, our parting was entirely amicable.' Walker poured more orange into her glass. 'The second reason applies wherever or whatever he's doing. My lawyers have found a loophole in our arrangements. I need him to sign and fingerprint a copy of one of our contracts.'

'Fingerprint?'

'It's a new legal requirement with certain documents. I don't know why. But once he's done that, whatever happens to him, everything comes to me. He has to sign this before the police get to him. If he dies or is arrested before this document is signed, I lose everything.'

'Everything you have or everything you have coming to you?'

'Both.'

Walker had been studying her closely. Now, suddenly aware that she was scrutinizing him, he asked hurriedly, 'So why me? There are trackers who –'

'Too unreliable. It's quite possible that trackers have

already been employed to find him – by the people who want to kill him.’

‘But why me?’

‘As I said, you’ve had a more interesting life than you let on. You could do it. You’re not doing anything else. And you’re restless.’

‘How do you know I’m restless?’

‘I meant you’re totally content. Is that better?’

‘Yes, it doesn’t matter,’ Walker said, smiling.

‘I have no idea what it will involve,’ Rachel continued. ‘It’s possible you will find him in a few days. It is equally possible that he has genuinely disappeared and has camouflaged his tracks – in which case finding him will be more difficult. Either way the important thing is that you find him before anyone else.’

‘So you want me to find him and get him to sign and fingerprint a piece of paper. That’s all?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what if he doesn’t want to sign this new will or contract or whatever?’

‘Then perhaps you mention that there are people who wish to see him dead and who would pay a lot to know his whereabouts. It won’t come to that. Like I said, Alex has always been generous to me.’

‘And –’ Walker paused ‘– why is this of interest to me?’

‘First, I will pay you a great deal of money. Tell me, how much did you make from finding Orlando Brandon?’

‘Enough.’

‘Whatever you earned for finding Brandon, I will pay double. More than enough, you might say.’

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Walker raised his eyebrows as if to say, 'That's a very generous offer.'

'I think it is not the money that will interest you. It is the case itself. You will have very little to go on. It will be a challenge. For example, Alex hated – hates – being photographed. There is no photograph of him as far as I can discover.'

'Not even a passport?'

'He has that with him.'

'And are trackers already after him?'

'Impossible to tell.'

'How long since you heard from him?'

'Six months.'

Walker was tugging at his right ear-lobe with thumb and forefinger. She pointed at his ear and said, 'You'll end up with one ear longer than the other.'

'What?'

'Pulling your ear like that.'

'My father used to do it. It's a gesture I've inherited.'

Their glasses were empty apart from melting ice.

'Well?'

'I'll call you,' he said, and this time she gave him her number.

The strangeness of her story bothered Walker less than the way it challenged his gathering sense of inertia. He had been drifting for months, uncertain what to do, forming vague plans but lacking the resolution to see anything through. He was waiting for a decisive moment – a moment that would impel him to make a decision – but no such moment came. Every morning he had breakfast at the Café Madrid and walked

down to the ocean. Every other day he lifted weights. Afternoons he went running along the beach. Evenings he drank. His growing addiction to this regime of fitness – and the drinking it served to offset – was one of a number of small details that made him postpone any commitment to change. He had so little to do that even minor chores like going to the bank became major events in his day. The more he pondered things the more restless he became, floundering in a sea of impulses. He had no responsibilities, no obligations, and so found himself paralysed by choice, waiting to see what came his way. Now something had come his way – a challenge, she had said – and he balked at the prospect, longed instead for his current life to continue indefinitely and without interruption.

Tracking: he turned the word over in his mind, taking the measure of his feelings. After Brandon's death he'd sworn – not sworn, to swear not to do something always seemed like an incitement to do it – he'd resolved not to get involved in anything like that again, especially now, now that it was illegal, dangerous.

Six years previously tracking had been an industry virtually. It started as a response to rewards being offered for information regarding the whereabouts of prominent figures who had gone missing. One case attracted a lot of publicity when the man claiming the reward called himself a professional tracker. The term caught on and the numbers of people disappearing, it seemed to Walker, increased in order to keep pace with the growing numbers of people calling themselves trackers. It got to the point where, like lights left on in an empty house, a pile of clothes left on

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a beach was taken as a sign not of accidental drowning but of an inadequate attempt to disguise a disappearance. Whenever anyone disappeared there was always somebody who had a vested interest in finding him or her again. Anyone with a taste for adventure was lured into the idea of tracking; the classified pages of small-town papers always included a few ads from trackers offering their services. Even the government department responsible for missing persons – Finders to themselves and everyone else – was getting in on the act. A number of officers were alleged to have located a missing person and then sold the information to a private concern. Finders keepers, it was commonly joked, was the motto of the Missing Persons' Department. Lured by the prospect of big money, anyone in the department with ambition and initiative went solo after a few years. The government moved quickly: missing persons, it ruled, had to be investigated by the government department only. Tracking was illegal without a licence – and a licence became impossible to obtain. The move backfired: putting trackers beyond the law meant that a lot of people living outside the law got in on tracking. Many trackers had been less than reliable or scrupulous in their methods, but now that they were firmly outside the law their methods became increasingly ruthless. Like trafficking, tracking became one of the standard activities of the underworld. And this was the world Walker was being lured back into.

The day after Rachel's visit he walked along the beach, hearing the freeway roar of the ocean, feeling the fling and reach of spray. He picked a curve of brown glass from the

sand. Sea-lions were clowning in the breaking waves. A dog scampered after a chewed husk of ball. Clumps of kelp, driftwood.

Later, when the light was turning hazy, he called her from a telephone on the boardwalk. He had not known what he was going to say when he dialled her number but hearing her voice he decided on impulse. Yes, he said, he'd do it.

They spent a day together, sitting outside in the first warm sun of the year. Rachel was wearing a pale dress and a cardigan, one button missing. Walker asked her to tell him everything about Malory, the people he knew, his business contacts, his habits. Whenever he asked for more details she paused and answered his questions patiently. Walker made notes, so intent on watching her speak that at times he did not hear what she was saying. He drifted, thinking of the happiness that might lie in wait for them. Then he was jolted back to the present. Rachel was telling him of the allegations of corruption that had come in the wake of Malory's winning a huge bridge-building contract.

'You didn't hear about it?'

'No. Sorry. Like I said, I never read papers.'

'Television?'

'Only sport.'

'Not films even?'

'Not really.'

'Alex -'

'If I find him,' Walker interrupted, 'you just want me to get those documents signed?'

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'Yes.'

'You don't want me to bring him back?'

'I think you're not being quite honest again, Mr Walker.'

'What do you mean?'

'I think you do watch films. Old ones. And no, all I want are the documents.'

'Did he have affairs?'

'I don't know.'

'You mean if he did you don't know?'

'I don't see the distinction.'

'What about you?'

'What about me?'

'Did you? Have affairs?'

'No.' Then, business-like again, she said, 'Shall I go on?' Walker crossed his legs, preparing to resume his note-taking.

That evening he cooked dinner for them both. They ate outside, drank wine. He lent Rachel a sweater, which she draped around her shoulders. Earlier in the day he had seen her handwriting for the first time. Now, for the first time, he was watching her eat. Seeing things for the first time. Relationships last for as long as there are still things to see for the first time. Walker thought of the future when they would look back to the moment they first saw each other. She was eating lettuce with her fingers. A drop of dressing glistened on her lips. She dabbed her mouth with a napkin, blue. Her mouth.

They took the plates inside. Walker made coffee. Rachel had her back against the wall. She had discarded

his sweater. He moved over to her, leant one hand against the wall, level with her shoulder. She took a dark gulp of wine, aware of his arm like the low branch of a tree she would have to duck under. Sleeves rolled above his elbows, veins in his forearm.

‘That’s a lovely dress,’ he said.

‘You like it?’

‘Yes.’ He moved his other arm so that it too was pressed against the wall on the other side of her shoulders and she was enclosed by the cage of his body, the hoop of his arms. The movement brought his face lower, a few inches closer to hers. Their lips were almost touching.

‘You know what kind of dress that is?’

‘The kind you can buy anywhere.’

‘It’s the kind of dress I want to put my hand up.’

She pressed back against the wall. Their hearts were beating faster.

‘You know what kind of line that is?’

‘No.’

‘I think you do.’

‘And that’s not all,’ said Walker. ‘There’s something else.’

‘What?’ The air felt heavy around them.

‘It’s the kind of dress . . .’ Walker said, freeing the words from the coarseness in his throat, ‘the kind of dress I want to pull up over your hips, the kind of dress where you raise your arms and I pull it over your head.’

‘To do that the zip would have to be undone.’

Walker moved one hand from the wall to her legs, below the hem of her dress.

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‘After the zip was undone, then I would pull it over your head. Then –’

‘And then I would undo the buttons of your shirt, your belt.’

Walker moved his hand up between her thighs, feeling her skin become softer and softer until it attained that softness that can never be remembered because it is impossible to imagine anything so soft, because there is nothing to compare it with, to store it alongside. Their lips touched for a moment. Then Walker felt her hand on his wrist, pushing it away from between her legs.

‘No,’ she said, ducking beneath his other arm, smoothing down her dress. In prison he had heard stories like this many times, stories that ended in rape and hate. Walker took up the position Rachel had occupied, leaning back against the wall, his hands hanging by his side. She came towards him, kissed him on the lips.

‘You understand?’ she said.

‘No, yes. No.’

‘But you understand?’

‘No,’ he said.

Malory lived – ‘as far as he lives anywhere’ – in a beach house a couple of hundred miles up the coast. Rachel gave Walker a set of keys and he drove there the next day. A storm was building, the sun flinching in and out of clouds. The house was sparse and expensive, built mainly out of windows. Rugs on wood floors, white walls.

Despite everything Rachel had told him it was difficult to form an impression of Malory from the evidence of his

home. There was furniture, a few records, books – not enough of either to suggest any passion for music or reading. There were a few pictures on the walls, none of which he paid much attention to – except for a framed Victorian photograph. It was of a man sitting in a chair, wearing a heavy sepia suit, eyeglasses. Walker wondered who it was and moved closer to read the small caption in the right-hand corner: ‘Unknown Self-portrait’. Walker stepped back and gazed at the face of this strange ghost, captivated by the closed logic of the picture. Who was he? A man who looked like this . . . But who was he?

Walker moved away from the sad old photograph and went round the rest of the house. It was a place dominated by the absence of everything except light and places to sit or move around. In the study he went through Malory’s files and desk. Rachel had said that if he was away his secretary came in once a week to take care of all his personal affairs, and in a desk drawer he found credit card statements and bills. From these he was able to trace his movements up until three months ago; since then there was nothing. The last payment was to a car rental firm in Durban. Walker made a note of the company’s name and went round the house once more. No flowers or ornaments, only the vista windows looking out over the ocean heaving silently.

Back at his own apartment he called the rental company and asked if they had any information about a car rented three months ago by –

The woman cut him off there and said she couldn’t possibly deal with queries like that on the phone. As soon as

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he put the phone down it rang beneath his hand: Rachel. Her voice.

‘Did you find out anything?’

‘Not really. What about this secretary – could I speak to her?’

‘No point at all. She’s been with him for fifteen years. He likes her because she never asks any questions. He won’t have told her anything about where he is. Like I told you, he’s a very secretive man. Pathological. You almost had to use the Freedom of Information Act to get his birthday out of him.’

‘Yes.’

‘So what will you do next?’

‘I suppose I’d better start looking for him.’

‘Meaning?’

‘The only lead we have is that rental firm. I guess I’ll head to Durban.’

‘When will you leave?’

‘As soon as I can.’

‘But I’ll see you before you go?’

‘I hope so,’ he said.

They met later that night, in a bar with candles and no music. Walker ordered beer, bought one for a guy he knew who was sitting at the bar. Rachel drank red wine that looked thick and sleepy in the candlelight. In the curved darkness of her glass Walker saw a reflection of both their faces, dancing, swaying, settled. She handed him the documents that she needed Malory to sign. Walker glanced through them.

‘About money,’ Rachel said.

‘We can take care of that when I get back.’

'You're sure?'

'The money is no problem.'

Rachel finished her wine. 'Let's pay and go down to the sea,' she said.

They walked to the beach, listening to the crash of waves. In places the receding tide had left still pools of water that reflected the stars so perfectly it seemed they were breaks of clear sky in a beach of cloud. Jumping across them was like leaping over the sky itself. Every now and then headlights from the coast road probed out to sea. In the distance they could see the hazy spars of the Bay Bridge. Clouds slipped past a moon that was barely there. They threw a few stones into the sea, listening out for the faint splashes. A ship's lights blinked in the middle of the darkness and then disappeared.

'And nothing is but what is not,' said Rachel.

'Was that a quote?'

'Shakespeare. I forget which one.'

'William probably,' said Walker.

They sat and waited, looking out at the dark ocean. Rachel said she should be getting back. Walker turned towards her.

'I have a present for you,' she said. 'Here.' She held out her fist and dropped a thin silver chain into Walker's palm.

'Maybe it will bring you luck,' she said. 'Keep you safe.' Walker remembered a comic strip he had read as a kid: 'Kelly's Eye'. As long as Kelly wore this jewel around his neck he was indestructible. Each week ended with him walking out of an incredible explosion or twenty-car smash-up, naked

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except for the stone around his neck and a tattered pair of shorts which were also indestructible.

‘Let me put it on for you.’

Walker bent his head and felt her arms reach around his neck, fiddling with the clasp. Her mouth was near his. This was the moment when they could have kissed but it passed.

‘Do you like it?’

‘Yes. Sorry, I never know what to say when I’m given a present.’

She smiled – ‘Let’s get going’ – and they began making their way back up the low cliff to her car.

‘There’s something else as well,’ she said when she had unlocked the car door. She reached over to the passenger seat and handed Walker an envelope. In it was the photo that had been taken at the party. Or part of it anyway: it had been cut in two and the half he held showed Rachel, almost in profile, holding the wine glass in both hands as if she were praying.

‘To remind me you exist?’ Walker said.

‘Maybe.’

‘What about the other half?’

‘I keep that. To remind me that you do,’ she said. ‘Can I give you a lift?’

‘No. It’s five minutes from here, that’s all.’

They were both eager to be on their own now, wanting the leaving to be over with, knowing that everything between them would have to wait.

‘Is there anything else I can do?’ Rachel said finally, standing by the open door of the car.

GEOFF DYER

'No. I'll call you.'

'Be careful, won't you?'

Walker said yes, yes he would. He watched her drive off and waited for the tail lights to disappear from sight before heading home himself.