Some Rain Must Fall

FRANCES STRATHAIRN came home to find that her partner had cooked her a meal.

'First day at your new job,' he said. 'I thought you'd be exhausted.'

My relationship with this man is in crisis, Frances reminded herself, kissing him on the lips. *There is no doubt about it.*

But of course there was doubt. Exhausted, she collapsed on the sofa and ate her meal, which was excellent. Her own recipe, followed to perfection.

'So how are the kids?' he asked.

It wasn't a question about any children belonging to him or her: they weren't that kind of couple. He was asking her about the pupils at Rotherey Primary School.

'It's too soon to tell,' she said.

The first thing she'd got them to do was tidy up. Wellies in neat rows. Coats on pegs. Story books arranged from largest to smallest. Every pencil sharp.

Neatness was not her own personal bugbear: she merely knew, as a professional, that it was what the children craved. She was their new teacher and had been imposed on them at short notice; a contract must be made. They needed to demonstrate their goodness, their usefulness; they needed her to demonstrate her authority.

Most of all, they needed life to go on, with a maximum of fuss.

'Next: does every one of you have an eraser?' asked Frances.

The rustle and click of a dozen pencil cases being disembowelled.

'Anyone whose eraser is smaller than this, gets one of these,' she smiled, holding up one of the bagful of brand-new giant Faber-Castells she always brought along to new classes.

General wonderment as every child realised he or she qualified for one of these magnificent gifts.

Out of the corner of her eye, Frances observed one of the school's other teachers watching her from the doorway of the next room, no doubt wondering if Frances was really worth three times an ordinary teacher's salary.

'Now, I want every one of you to look through your project books and choose a page that you think has your very best handwriting on it. When you've chosen, I want you to lay your books open at that page, all together on the floor just here . . . No, not on top of one another – all showing fully. Edge to edge, like bricks in a wall. But with a little space in between. That's right . . . Give each other room. Good . . . Good . . .'

Frances squatted down, giving the children the hint that she could play with them at their level, while reminding them with her bigness and her spreading halo of skirt that she was something other. Though scarcely interested in their handwriting at this stage, she noted that nobody was conspicuously incompetent: Jenny MacShane, their teacher until last week, can't have been too bad.

On the morning of the second day, the two children who

hadn't turned up on the first day presented themselves. That was a good sign: word of mouth among the mothers, perhaps.

Frances read the absence notes: upset tummy for little Amy, doctor's appointment for little Sam. Fear, most likely, which might have grown unmanageable if they'd been allowed to stay away longer. She welcomed Amy and Sam back to their school, gave them their erasers. They were slower than the others to settle in, so Frances decided, among other things, to put off the essays until tomorrow.

Frances herself was slow to settle in to her new house on the hill above Rotherey village.

Her last lodgings had been in a ramshackle apartment – dog's-dinner decor, hastily convened furniture. She'd liked it there: it had once been the occupational therapy wing of a mental asylum, before Care in the Community had evicted the inmates. It still had some intriguing features: the odd mark on the wall, peculiar plastic things sealing some of the power outlets, a wicker clothes-basket woven by unsteady hand.

This house in Rotherey was a council house, cosy and generic; a policeman and his wife had lived there, and had respected all its prefab integrities. Not so much as a WANTED poster in the loo.

'The anonymity of this place gives me the shits,' she said to Nick, her partner.

'Well . . . Can I change anything for you?' he offered. 'I've got the time.'

Enjoying a sabbatical while he waited for his doctoral thesis to be assessed, he did indeed have the time, but there was nothing Frances could imagine him doing with this house. Rather, she wanted *him* to change.

'Let's go to bed,' she sighed.

The next night, though, she stayed up.

'How long, do you think?' he asked, just to sort out the sleeping arrangements.

'As long as it takes,' she replied.

As with everything, he was fine about having to sleep on his own; well-behaved, well-behaved, well-behaved. She wished he would haul her up to the bedroom and fuck her. It would be inconsiderate and inconvenient, God yes: she had no time for sex tonight because she had the children's essays to examine: eleven responses she must keep distinct in her mind, eleven plans of action she must conceive by the morning – as well as needing some sleep, of course. And yet she longed for him to knock her off course, or at least dare to try.

In her lap lay the children's essays: 'About Me, My School and My Teacher'. To each one she had clipped the best ID shot she'd been able to cull from the school's photographic montages of prize-giving nights, sports teams, Christmas concerts.

The first essay to hand was by Fiona Perry, the blonde one with the tiny ears and the oversized T-shirts.

Our school is called Rotherey Primary School. It has three big rooms, the oldest kids are Primary 6 and 7 and that is the room I am in. We do the hard stuff. Next year I am going to Moss Bank Accademey. Our teacher says thats where the fun really begins. Our teacher isnt at the school anymore. The last day I saw her she had to go home because she was crying. The next day was the day I was off sick with food poisning (the wrong kind of fish). But my best friend Rachel says our teacher just lost her head that day and now shes not coming back. We have a new teacher now who is you Mrs Strathiarn who is reading this essay!

Frances turned the page to see if there was any more, but that was all Fiona had to say, so she turned the sheet face-down on the couch next to her. 'The wrong kind of fish' – she smiled sadly. The wrong kind of fish could make a child an absentee on a day which might have changed its life for ever. Fiona Perry had missed a Wednesday presumably quite at random; yet by that evening her parents, along with the parents of all her classmates, had been phoned with the news that all the children could stay home until a replacement teacher for Mrs MacShane was found. In her essay, little Fiona was turning on the charm for the newcomer without missing a beat; Mrs MacShane had simply disappeared from her young life as if rubbed out by that lovely new eraser.

My school is called Rotherey Primary, wrote Martin Duffy. *I am in the big grade, Primary 6. I use to live in Bolton when I was young. My mum says that what happened with Mrs Macshane has got nothing to do with me and I should forget about it. Lots of people have asked me about 1,000 times and some times I tell them and some times I dont. But every time I do tell I forget it worse and worse, because really as soon as Mrs Macshane started crying I got embarsed and covered my eyes and I didnt see much. So thats my story.*

As if to punctuate, a toilet flushed. Nick, coming down for one last pee before sleep.

Don't you realise our relationship is in crisis! she felt like yelling to him, which was such an absurd impulse that she laughed out loud. He heard her laugh and came to her, his wrists still wet from hurried towelling.

'Something funny?' he wanted to know. His sense of humour was the best thing about him – one of the best things, anyway. He stood there, naked above the waist, a spray of glistening water-drops across his ribcage, a glow cast

over his contours by her reading lamp. Her breath caught with the pain of soon not being with him anymore, because she would push him away, make sure he would never come back.

'Come here,' she murmured. He obeyed.

She would make love to him fast, here on the couch, then get on with her work. Undressing, she speculated on what Martin Duffy had really seen through his ten little fingers, which were tinged with the Marmite he had for breakfast. The covering of eyes was a social gesture, a message to one's peers asking for confirmation of the transgressive status of an event . . . She slid her rear over the edge of the couch to let Nick get inside her from where he was kneeling. So, did Martin Duffy really not see much? She doubted it. She might have to work on him, if there was evidence that his apparent robustness was a defence mechanism. Being new to the village made him vulnerable straight off, though on the other hand it would have prevented him getting too attached to Jenny MacShane . . . Right now Frances had to admit that her clitoris wasn't getting enough friction, especially with that damned condom, and her back was being repeatedly stabbed by a metal zip on one of the cushions.

'Let's go upstairs,' she said.

After orgasm, drunk with endomorphins, she drifted off to sleep, nestled against his back.

The school is fine and my old teacher is fine. This was the entire text of Greg Barre's essay. Which one was he again? She couldn't picture him, even with the aid of the photograph – admittedly an out-of-focus shot of a Nativity performance: a blur of cotton-wool beards and cardboard wings.

'What does this kid make you think of?'

She handed Nick the photograph across the breakfast

table. He checked his fingers for margarine and took hold of the tiny square of card by its edges.

'Shy,' he decided after a moment.

'Why?'

'In Christmas plays they always give the non-speaking shepherd parts to the shy ones. The girl in front is obviously the one who says, "We have followed a star," or whatever. This kid just has to tag along – maybe hand over a gift.'

She smiled at him as he handed back the photograph, a real eye-to-eye smile, the most genuinely intimate exchange they'd had for days. He was perceptive, all right. When it came to strangers.

'You'd make a good father,' she purred, still conscious of her flesh tingling with satisfaction and sleeplessness.

'Let's not start that again,' he advised her tersely.

Something flashed disconcertingly in her line of vision. It was the photo of little Greg. She hadn't accepted it back yet, and Nick was irritated all of a sudden, waving the image at her as if she'd already lumbered him with a child he didn't want.

The school was walking distance from the house, which was a pity in a way. A long drive in the passenger seat of someone's car would have given her a precious last chance to read the other essays. How could she have fallen asleep last night? She was like those useless men that women were always complaining about in advice columns.

'Good morning Mrs Strathairn!' chorused the children when she walked in.

She was 'Mrs' to them. She was always 'Mrs' to her classes, by professional decision. She felt that children trusted her more if they believed her to be a conventional spouse and mother, as if this made her an emissary from that story book world where family equations were not negotiable.

Unconventional and coolly feminist among her peers, she was able to compromise instantly and enthusiastically when she saw the need for it. Perhaps this quality more than any other got her chosen ahead of colleagues in her field, at least in fiendishly delicate situations like this.

She'd figured out almost immediately which of the children were the touchy-feely ones, and she drew them to her as bait for the others. Her talent was to radiate safety and the restoration of order. It was a gift she had possessed well before all her years of training.

Already children were pressing themselves to her, whispering things into her ear just for the thrill of leaning against her soft shoulder. The ones she was most worried about weren't these, but she worked hard to charm them anyway: they would help thaw the others out.

'Rachel? I'm told you know how to use the photocopier in the office. Could you make ten copies of this very important document, please?'

Rachel (*I don't play with many people at all I like doing work much more*) hurried away to the sacred machine, glowing with pride at the confidence shown in her as she prepared to step into an off-limits zone and tame the mysteries of technology.

Frances had a feel for the group as a whole, its tensions and safety valves, its flame-haired explosives, its doe-eyed emollients. The shock of the last day the children had spent with Mrs MacShane was working its way through their systems at different rates; Frances guessed that either Jacqui Cox or Tommy Munro would be the first to crack, in some spectacular incident that would appear to have no connection with their old teacher. Jacqui (classic hot-house flower, very particular that her fellow pupils spell her name 'the proper way') had written in her essay:

I like my teacher very much and I wouldn't want another one, at least not permantly. She has all my old work and it was her that wrote my reports and she knows why she wrote what she wrote. So when she comes back she will be able to keep me straight.

Tommy Munro, an ill-coordinated, excitable boy with startlingly long eyelashes and a prem head, wrote much the same essay to the best of his more limited abilities: *My old teacher is fine and everthing els is to.*

But his old teacher wasn't fine, at all, and Tommy was struggling with the impossibly unfair challenges of ruling straight margins and glueing sheets of cardboard together, his emotions corkscrewed deep into his pigeon chest.

Miraculously, nothing unusual happened on the fourth day, at least nothing any ordinary teacher wasn't paid to deal with. Just a heated argument about who was supposed to bring the sports chairs inside now that it had started raining – class beauty Cathy Cotterill, overwhelmed by responsibility. Red-faced, grimacing with a bee-stung mouth that would soon be grinning broadly again, she was one of life's intuitive survivors. Her essay had devoted two matter-of-fact lines to the circumstances of Mrs MacShane's departure, then went on to fill a page with *I don't play football much I rather play hop scoch. On Monday I get Jim I am not very good at Jim* and so on. Her anger had in-built transience and a limited scope: as an emotional firelighter she was a dud.

Exercising authority like a physical skill, Frances calmly took hold of the flailing ends of the dispute and wound them around her little finger. The yelling stopped, the threat of mayhem disappeared without a trace, and within ten minutes she had her entire class sitting at her feet, spellbound as she paraphrased text and showed photographs from a book about albinism. Frances had quite a number of these sorts of books:

odd enough to promise children a frisson of the bizarre, informative enough to fill their heads with the crunchy cereal of fact, irrelevant enough to be unthreatening. The sight of white Aborigines with pink eyes was enough to keep even Tommy dumbstruck while the cleverer ones frowned over the finer points of genetics.

As the rain dimmed the skies outside and the fluorescent strip-light took over, the children looked a bit albino themselves, a phenomenon Frances pointed out to suppressed squeals of queasy delight.

'Maybe it's catching,' she teased.

At hometime it was raining so heavily that even those children who lived easy walking distance from the school were picked up by relatives or neighbours in cars. All except Harriet Fishlock and her tiny brother Spike from the tots' grade. (Frances found it hard to believe his name could really be Spike, but that was what everyone called him.)

'I don't know how I'm going to get Spike home,' sighed Harriet, fussing her pet-sized sibling into his greasy duffle-coat, 'without him getting totally soaked.'

Harriet lived in a shabby caravan park on the edge of the village with her alcoholic mother and a stepfather who could get spare parts for cars if necessary. There were rumours of sexual abuse, and a social services file running into dozens of pages.

'I have an umbrella,' said Frances. 'A super-duper giant umbrella. I can walk with you as far as the petrol station.' She watched the flicker of calculation cross the girl's face: yes, the petrol station was not in view of the wretched caravans: yes, the answer was yes.

Together they walked through the streets of Rotherey, the pelting rain screening the shops and houses as if through frosted glass. Everything was an indistinct and luminous grey,

a vast sea with a mirage of a village shimmering on the waves, through which car headlights cruised slowly like distant ships. To get the best cover from the umbrella, Spike and Harriet walked on either side of Frances, and after ten minutes or so Frances was surprised and delighted to feel Harriet fumbling to hold hands with her.

Near the edge of the village, a red light pulsed luridly through the gloom: a police car parked outside the MacShane house. The police were there every day, apparently, though what they hoped to achieve at this late stage was hard to imagine. Perhaps they thought David MacShane would come back to pick up his mail or feed the dog.

The rain was thrashing down absurdly now, as if in fury, almost deafeningly noisy against the fabric of the umbrella. Luckily there was no wind, so Frances was able to hold their protecting canopy still as spouts of water clattered off the edges all around them.

'This is awful!' shouted Harriet.

'No it's not!' Frances called back. 'We're safe under here, and the rain won't last!'

They passed the petrol station; Frances said nothing. She understood she was crossing a Rubicon of trust and would soon glimpse the farther shore of caravan-land.

'This is where we live,' said Harriet when the park was in view. The rain, softening now, shimmered like television static all over the dismal junkyard of permanently stalled mobile homes. Frances knew that to accompany the children any farther would be to push her luck.

Yet, as Harriet and her brother were leaving the canopy of their new teacher's umbrella, Harriet made a little speech, spoken at a gabble as if escaping under pressure.

'Mrs MacShane used to come here sometimes after school. To see a man who's moved away now. They made loud noises together inside his caravan for hours, then she'd go home to

the village. It was sex – everybody knows that. That's why Mr MacShane got so angry. He must of found out.'

The secret relayed at last, Harriet grabbed her brother by the hand and hopped gingerly into the marshy filth of her home territory.

In Frances's home – or rather, the house she would live in for the duration of this assignment – all was not well.

The wild weather (highest volume of rainfall in a single day since 1937, the radio would have told her if she'd known how to find the local station) had battered through the roof's defences, and there was water dripping in everywhere.

Frances walked through the upstairs rooms, squinting up at the clammy ceilings. They seemed to be perspiring in terror or exertion. In the bedroom especially, the carpet sighed under her feet and the bed was drenched: Nick had brought the buckets in too late. Returning downstairs. Frances almost broke her neck on the slick fur of the carpeted steps; perversely, this somehow knocked the edge off the contempt she felt for the house – as well as shaking her up badly.

'I did check all the windows were closed when the downpour started,' Nick told her a little defensively. 'I just didn't expect the place to leak, that's all.'

They looked up together at the droplets of rainwater gathering on the umbilicus of the light fitting. All the power in the house might blow any second.

'I want a child with you, Nick,' said Frances, hearing herself speak as if through the din of a rainstorm, though the brunt of it was actually over now, leaving the after-effects to carry on the harm.

Nick stared at her uncomprehendingly, as if her comment might decode itself into being about buckets or laundromats.

'We've talked about this before,' he said, warningly.

'I want it.'

She wanted him to take her upstairs, smack her down on the sodden bedsheets, and start a little life that would grow up to walk under an umbrella with her one day.

'I've told you,' he reminded her. 'You could maybe adopt one, as a single parent, and I could see how I feel. No guarantees.'

'It's not the shared responsibility I'm worried about, you bastard,' she said. 'I want your baby and mine. From the beginning. Nothing on the slate except *our* genetics. A clean start. Adopted children bring their damage with them from the womb, from the day they leave the womb. Already in the cradle they're soaking up their parents' fuck-ups.'

'Oh! Well!' he exclaimed, gesticulating aggressively. 'What a pity the fucked-up human race has to keep bringing children into the world, instead of leaving it to experts like you!'

Mesmerised by his violent display, she followed the sweep of his big hands, longing for him to hit her, batter her to the floor. But even in anger he was hopelessly, infuriatingly safe.

'Damn right!' she screamed in a misery of triumph.

'You know what you are?' he accused her, shoving his face right up to hers so she could see his lips forming the words with exaggerated clarity. 'A – con*trol* – freak.'

After they'd finished arguing, they stripped the bed, turned up the central heating and went out to Rotherey's only restaurant, a combination hotel and snooker hall which also did Indian.

Inevitably, the mother of one of the children from Jenny MacShane's class was there too, buying a carry-out, and she stumbled straight to Frances and Nick's table.

'I just want to thank you for what you're doing,' she told Frances blushingly. 'Last night, for the first time since . . .

you know . . . this terrible MacShane business . . . our Tommy slept right through without having nightmares or wetting the bed.'

'That's good to hear,' smiled Frances.

'I just want to say that I don't care how much you're getting paid, you're worth every penny.'

'Thank you,' smiled Frances. Warmth came harder to her when it was parents or other teachers wanting it.

'I just wanted to know . . . Is there any chance of you staying on? As Tommy's permanent teacher?'

'No, I'm afraid not,' smiled Frances. Her lamb korma, none too hot when it was served, had stopped steaming altogether. And she could tell that this woman was going to go away and tell the other mothers that Frances Strathairn wouldn't stoop to work at a teacher's wage.

'Much as I'd love to,' she sighed, making the effort. 'The powers that be wouldn't let me.'

The mother went away then, walking with a peculiar shambling gait and a posture which suggested congenital inferiority. Frances stared at the door she had gone through, and picked at her food irritably. God, how she disliked herself for pleading impotence when that had nothing to do with why she must move on! This pretence of being the passive slave of higher authority – it was a deplorable lapse in dignity, an act of prostitution.

And to top it all off, she was going to break up with her man.

'I've seen you like this before,' observed Nick quietly from the other side of the candles. 'You always get like this just before the job's over. Those kids that survived the bus crash in Exeter, remember? A few days before you finished up there, we had almost the same argument' – he smirked – 'almost the same restaurant. And that time in Belfast—'

'Spare me the details,' she groaned, tossing her fork into

the mound of rice and taking a deep swig of wine. 'Ask the proprietor if there are any rooms free for tonight. If so, book one.'

He stood up, then hesitated.

'For how many people?'

'Two,' she chided. 'Bastard.'

Next day, the children started breaking down at last, more or less as Frances had been anticipating, with one or two exceptions. Tommy Munro seemed to have sidestepped the process, behaving with unusual maturity and poise for a brain-damaged kid; maybe, because he was so used to being confused and mistaken all the time, he'd come to believe that the incident with his old teacher must have happened in one of his nightmares.

Greg Barre, however, blew his crewcut top just after lunch-time, starting with a misunderstanding about which times table he was supposed to have learned, and climaxing with a shrieking fit. Mrs MacShane's name was thrown up in the ensuing hysteria and several children were soon weeping and accusing each other of causing what had happened or failing to stop it when they should have. Martin Duffy wailed his innocence with fists clenched against his day-glo sports shorts; Jacqui Cox wailed her guilt with arms wrapped tightly around her head. The teacher of the adjacent class rushed to the doorway, trembling with fear, her face twitching with a ghastly nervous smile like the ones sometimes seen on people about to be executed.

Frances gave her the hand-signal for 'I'll handle this', and a nod of permission to shut the door.

Then she moved forward and took control.

By the end of the day, she had them all quiet again, entranced by her own soothing murmur and the gentle patter of rain

on the windows. She sat in the midst of them on a high stool, keeping the stories coming and the airwaves humming, hypnotising herself to ignore the fact that her rear end was numb under the weight of Jacqui's body in her lap. Jacqui was going to be a big girl, at least physically. Emotionally, she was too small for life outside the womb, and she clung to her teacher's waist with marsupial tenacity, pressing her face hard into Frances's bosom. She had been weeping for hours, an infinitely sustainable whimper: nothing that half a lifetime of reassurance couldn't fix.

Greg Barre was playing quoits with Harriet Fishlock and Katie Rusek, happy as a lamb, wearing the sackcloth trousers he'd worn as a shepherd in the Christmas play. His own were drying out on one of the radiators; he'd soiled them at the height of his frenzy. Frances had recognised she couldn't afford to leave the group to attend to him alone, and had chosen Katie to bear him off to the toilets and help him get changed; a risky choice, given the rigid gender divisions in this little world of Rotherey, but Frances judged it was the right one: Katie was mature and self-assured, Greg was afraid of her and secretly infatuated too. Most importantly, Katie was smart enough to perceive that the situation – half the class weeping and throwing hysterics, a boy with shit in his pants – was beyond the control of just one adult, and she caught the devolution of responsibility as if it were a basketball. In her essay she had written:

My name is Katie Rusek and I am in Grade 7 of Rotherey Village School. Something very bad happened here last week. Our teacher Mrs MacShane was giving us a Maths lesson when her husband came in to the class room with a shot gun. He swore at Mrs MacShane and hit her until she was on the floor. She kept saying please not in front of the children but it didn't make any difference. Then her husband told her to put the end

of his gun in to her mouth and suck on it. She did that for a few seconds and then he blew her head to bits. We were all so, so scared but he went away and now the police are looking for him. Every time I think about that day I feel sick. I ask myself, will I ever get over it?

From her perch, Frances watched Katie Rusek watching Greg Barre prepare to throw another quoit. Desperation to impress his guardian angel was making him suddenly awkward, a faltering of confidence which both Katie and Frances, from their different angles, noticed instantly.

'Let's play something else,' the girl whispered in his ear, before he'd even thrown.

Frances murmured on. She was telling the class about her squelchy house, her wet bed, how she'd spent the night in the Rotherey Hotel. She made up a story about how she and her husband had tried to sleep at home but the water had come up through the mattress and soaked their pyjamas. She described how she and her husband had balanced the mattress on its side near the heater and watched the steam begin to rise. She kept returning to the theme that her house was in chaos just now but that she could manage because she had people to help her, and soon everything would return to normal. All the while she pressed her cheek against Jacqui Cox's wispy skull, stroking her gently at key phrases.

She talked on and on, effortlessly, the words coming from a reassurance engine idling deep within her; her words and the rain maintaining a susurrating spell over the children. Most listened in silence, some played games, completed word puzzles or drew pictures. No drawings of guns or exploding heads yet: Jacqui might do one of those for her next week sometime. In the days following that, she would smooth the new teacher in and then move on to God knows where.

Jacqui convulsed in her arms, jerked awake the instant

after falling asleep, and repositioned her ear in the hollow of Frances's breast, reconnecting with the heartbeat.

'It'll be all right, angel,' Frances purred. 'Everything will be all right.'

Fish

THESE DAYS, Janet let her daughter sleep in bed with her. It wasn't what child psychologists would have said was best, but there weren't any child psychologists anymore, and her daughter needed help just the same.

Janet had tried forcing Kif Kif to sleep alone, but the little girl would scream with nightmares about God knows what – sharks, probably. Now she was sleeping dreamlessly, cradled in the curve of Janet's waist.

All around the bed, the flywire was stretched taut from floor to ceiling, the support struts and entrance zipper glowing in the candle-light. Janet shut her eyes against the tick-tick-ticking on the wire and tried to drift off, but it was no use; there was always the anxiety that something was eating through the wire, through the canvas of the zipper, and you would open your eyes to find . . .

She opened her eyes. Nothing had changed.

There were still the same thirty or forty little fish (newly spawned wrasse, perhaps? – it was hard to tell in the dark) hovering in the air, bumbling against the flywire, trying to get in. Individual fish bobbed off from the cluster, floating up to bump against the ceiling.

Janet drew another cigar from the box on her lap, wishing it were a cigarette, *craving* a cigarette. She struck a match: the fish scattered. The room was alive with shining little bodies, flitting against the furniture, knocking ornaments off

shelves, disappearing into dark corners. Almost immediately, however, they began to swim back to the flywire, and the tick-tick-ticking began again. Kif Kif squirmed in her sleep, digging her hard little six-year-old's shoulderblades into Janet's side.

'It's all right darling,' murmured Janet, stroking her through the blankets. 'Nothing to be afraid of.'

Next morning Janet and Kif Kif dressed up in their camouflage to leave the house. The fish, which now lay gaping and dead on the floors of every room, had got in through the narrow gap between front door and hall floor. The little plank of wood which Kif Kif put there nightly had been levered out of place from the outside while they slept.

An act of paltry sabotage like this might happen to them every week or so; the devotees of the Church of Armageddon (the 'Army' for short) didn't like to pass a house by without attempting to advance their cause. As far as major attacks went, Janet and Kif Kif had been lucky. Only once in the last year had they returned to their house to find it smashed open, all the windows and doors unhinged, and all the food and clothing taken. Dripping, blood-like, down the bedroom wall had been one of the painted graffiti slogans of the Army: THE FIRST SHALL BECOME LAST!

On that awful day, Kif Kif had kept guard with her machete while Janet restored the defences. By late afternoon the five-year-old was splattered with fish blood and muck, although she hadn't been attacked by anything too dangerous. Most of the fish she'd wounded had swum away, to die inside deserted buildings and gutted cars, but some had been hacked too severely to do anything but wobble slowly to the ground and die twitching on the crumbling asphalt. When Kif Kif had suggested that these fish should

perhaps be taken to the Soup Kitchen for use as food, Janet had hugged her fear-shaken little girl and wept.

Today Janet and Kif Kif locked the door behind them, as quietly as possible, for sound was so much louder these days than it had sounded in the days when there were things like cars, factories and people running.

The million sea creatures moved noiselessly. Schools of barracuda swept without warning in and out of broken windows. Starfish wriggled on the bonnets of rusty cars. Octopi cartwheeled in slow motion through the air, their tentacles touching briefly on the tips of barbed-wire fences and the tops of awnings. Even the open-mouthed shriek of a shark attacking would be obscenely silent, so there was actually no point in keeping your ears cocked, though you always did.

At a cautious trot Janet and Kif Kif put a zig-zag of streets between them and their house, to confuse any Army members who might spot them. One day, of course, the Army might stop being nomadic, and concentrate on each occupied house they chanced to find, taking advantage of every occasion when it was left unoccupied, until at last its inhabitants had been killed by what they preferred to call the Holy Reclamation Of Nature.

Then again, it was also possible that one day the Army would amend its religion to permit its devotees to do the killing themselves, rather than waiting for the Holy Reclamation Of Nature to do it.

'Far enough now,' said Janet, her breath clouding the dry, grey air.

Kif Kif threw the plastic bag of dead wrasse into the gutter, where it burst open on the sharp edge of a broken wheelchair. A large eel floated out of a sewer-hole and slid through the air towards the spillage.

'Hungry?'

'Uh-huh.'

Coming back from the Soup Kitchen, feeling warm and sprightly with the city's only hot meal in their stomachs, Janet and Kif Kif leapt and skipped towards home. Small fish of all colours and shapes cluttered the air around them, frightened out of their foraging places by the commotion. Carp nibbled at the plankton nestled inside an exposed automobile engine. Barracuda circled a small dolphin which had become tangled in a shop awning and starved to death there. A manta ray of moderate size floated over their ducked heads and settled against the wall of a factory. Slowly it slid along a line of newly painted graffiti (ANY CRETURE THAT CAN READ THIS, YOU'RE DAYS ON EARTH ARE NUMBERD!), obscuring the words one by one. Janet repeated the slogan to her daughter on request.

'He's reading it,' smirked Kif Kif, making Janet laugh. They both knew the ray had mistaken the moist paint for something edible, and would be lying maw-up on the ground by tomorrow morning, after which the Army would probably find it and eat it. Since the Church of Armageddon had no equivalent of the underground Soup Kitchen which kept Janet, Kif Kif and the other unbelievers alive with salvaged tinned goods, it subsisted by fishing; Army nets could be seen occasionally, spanned between buildings in intricate layers.

It was rumoured that the Army didn't actually eat any of the tinned and packaged food they carried off from the houses they broke into. It seemed they merely confiscated it, to deprive Unbelievers of any unfair advantage. In the same way that they liked to crack the shell of an Unbeliever's house, to let the vengeance of Nature swim in, they liked to make food disappear, to signal that God was no longer prepared to provide. At least not to human beings; there was plenty to eat, of course, for everything that swam.

Accepting the divine wrath with bizarre enthusiasm, the Army were definitely on the side of the fish. There was hardly a public building in the city that was not marked with their commonest graffito: LET THE DRY LAND DISAPPEAR!

'A bit quieter now, Kif.'

Janet and Kif Kif were nearing their home streets. An acrid breeze started up, smelling of large, half-eaten fish. Janet's nose wrinkled with distaste. She reached out for Kif Kif and gathered her in as she walked.

'Sorry it's so nasty,' she said, but, looking down at the child's abstracted, placid face, Janet realised the apology was wasted: Kif Kif didn't seem to have noticed the smell.

Janet's mood soured as she considered that her daughter had grown up in a world which stank to high heaven. Kif Kif had never smelled air untainted by decay. She'd never seen a growing fruit or a flower, as every form of vegetation was immediately eaten by the fish before it even came to bud. She lived shut up in an unheated, poorly lit prison, trembling and twitching with nightmares every night. Even now, as they walked along the deserted street, any of a hundred broken windows might suddenly spew out a deadly streak of grey, and then what could you do? Janet had heard from other Survivors what it was like to just stand there while a huge shark, its jaws locked open, glided through the air towards the smallest prey. The Army certainly wasn't wrong in thinking the world was no longer intended for human beings. Kif Kif with her dinky little machete against the hatred of all creation—

'Mummy, look!'

Janet was jerked out of her brooding.

'What? What?'

Kif Kif pointed over the roofs of the houses, half-way across the city. Horrified, Janet watched a blue-black killer

whale emerging from the low grey clouds, followed by another whale, and another, and another. They hung huge in the sky like black zeppelins, and the air seemed to grow claustrophobically dense with their displacement of it. Janet would have sunk to her knees but for the grip she had on Kif Kif's shoulders. At her back there was nowhere to hide, only more crumbling streets, more fragile, half-broken buildings; a mile of ground a whale could cover in less than a minute, and, beyond that, the empty sea. The killer whales began to move, towards Janet and Kif Kif's part of the city. Their tails swept the air lazily. They kept together. They were attacking.

Not far from the street where Janet and Kif Kif stood, there towered an old building which had survived intact, marble statues and all. The foremost whale wove through skeletal office blocks with a grace that belied its massive size, and passed very close to this old building, almost clipping it with its aeroplane wing of a tail. Then it loomed on, its shadow spilling straight towards Kif Kif and Janet. By the time it reached where they stood it was swimming about thirty metres above the ground, the motion of its tail blowing their hair all around their faces. Directly overhead, blotting out the sun with its monstrous bulk, it opened its mouth. A thousand needle-sharp teeth swung down like the hatch of an aeroplane. Water clattered on the asphalt: saliva in the wind. Janet screamed.

But the whale glided over them altogether, its great shadow smothering them as it passed.

'It's coming back! It's coming back!' shrieked Janet as she watched the whale describe a slow semi-circle and cruise towards them again.

Once more, however, it passed them over, and headed towards the old building, while the other whales floated in formation nearby.

Turning again, it swam back towards Janet and Kif Kif, but in a smaller arc this time, so that its shadow didn't even reach the street where they stood. It was heading for the old building once more, and this time it did not pass it by. Some decision seemed to have been made deep in the creature's brain, and it hurled itself straight at its target, ramming into the stonework with its massive head.

Amid the noise of a muffled thunderclap, the old building shuddered, stones falling out of their pattern in small clusters. A pale statue swayed on its perch and toppled to the street below, smashing unseen and unheard. The other whales, following the example of their leader, attacked the building with him, ramming and ramming it until crucifixes cart-wheeled down through the air and bells rang with chaotic lack of rhythm. At last the church fell in on itself with the tremendous racket that only collapsing buildings make.

For an attenuated minute the whales circled the ruin, then they swam off towards another part of the city, their tails beating up clouds of shimmering debris.

Janet let out her breath shudderingly, then gasped at the pain of frozen muscles thawing. She wasn't really very grateful to be alive; life had been conceded too far beyond the extremity of terror. To be unconscious in the long gullet of a whale: that would have been *real* mercy, not this ghastly approximation of survival.

Only, she must *pretend* to be alive, *pretend* to have hope, spirit, feeling, for the sake of her daughter, so that her daughter wouldn't give up. She must be strong for her daughter, comfort her, get her home to bed, carry her there if need be.

Janet looked down at Kif Kif for the first time, and was shocked to see that the child's face was radiant.

'Oh, Mummy!' marvelled the little girl. 'Wasn't it amazing?'

'Amazing?' echoed Janet incredulously. 'Amazing?'

Anger started up deep inside her like convulsions, getting more violent as she let go her hold on it, until she was shaking with fury.

'Am*a*zing!?' she yelled at last, and began to hit Kif Kif, flailing at her with the flats of her hands. The child fought back, and in a few moments they were in a real tussle, pulling each other's clothes and hair, until a warning shout from Kif Kif ended it. Janet found herself being pulled along the street by the wrist.

'Come *on*!' shouted the panting child crossly. 'Stupid!'

Janet stumbled along, stumbling partly because she was too tall to be led properly by a six-year-old. She glanced over her shoulder to see what the child had already spotted: a school of moray eel gathering twenty yards away, attracted by the commotion of the fight and the smell of human flesh.

Janet gained her stride, scooped up her unprotesting daughter in her arms and ran and ran.

In bed that night, safe behind the flywire, Janet tried to explain why she had been so angry.

'I thought you were terrified of sharks and big fish like that,' she said lamely, hugging the slightly alien child tight to her side. 'You have nightmares every night . . .'

Kif Kif pawed sleepily at an itchy cheek and nose.

'I have nightmares about other stuff,' she said.