

Redefining Victory

a post-truth novel

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PART ONE

The parting of the ways

ONE

It was a tragedy waiting to happen. John (youthful forty-two, professional, creative type) wanted to find out who he was. His wife, Mary, did not understand him. She assumed he must be going through a mid-life crisis, so she was trying her best to be a friend in need.

“A penny for your thoughts,” she said, as they were driving along a winding country lane one damp and misty, grey November day.

“It’s autumn,” John responded gloomily. “The leaves are falling.”

“Time marches on,” said Mary, more in cheerful resignation than in explanation. Then the symbolism of his remark dawned on her. It offered a window of opportunity.

“John, you’re still in the prime of life, you know,” she added.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, remained an article of faith for Mary. Falling into the depths of despair wasn’t in anyone’s best interests. But she immediately sensed the male body beside her stiffen in emotional rearguard action.

Her husband of fourteen years settled back into the shell of his stony silence, almost with a vengeance. Mary, he realised, would like nothing more than for him to open up his heart to her. Stubbornly, he refused to rise to the bait. Her own heart was in the right place, of course. But a relatively sheltered early life had conditioned her to a strong sense of family values (her parents had stayed together until she was all of twenty-one). She seemed not to realise that if he were

to share his troubles with her, they would not be halved, but doubled.

A sense of sadness overwhelmed the thirty-nine year-old Mary. Had she been dreaming an impossible dream? At any rate, her wish list in life now seemed full of forlorn hopes. Over the past few weeks she had given John ample opportunity to air any grievances or make a clean breast of any dissatisfactions. But she had never known him less proactive where intimacy was concerned.

To make matters worse – as though fate just had to add insult to injury – they were on their way to the wedding of a close friend of hers. It seemed like only yesterday that she herself had walked down the aisle of a country church, knowing full well that a day would dawn when the honeymoon was over – not (as would have been all too obvious) in the literal sense, but in the words of.... But her train of thought had hit a mental buffer.

“John,” she said, in a puzzled tone.

“What?”

“Is it ‘For better or for worse?’”

“As in the plighting of troths?”

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“‘For better *and* for worse?’”

“Life has its ups and downs, true enough, not to mention its thick and its thin. But I think it’s ‘or’. After all, you wouldn’t say ‘For richer *and* poorer,’ would you? It sounds contradictory – ignoring any longer-term swings and roundabouts, of course.”

They were communicating! Suddenly, out of the blue, he was sounding like his old self!

“But it is ‘In sickness *and* in health’! Isn’t it? After all, not many people can say they’ve *never* been ill.”

John turned to look directly at her. Her soul withered under his searing gaze. “Just what are you

implying?" he snarled. "For the last time, I am *not* going to a shrink!"

"John! Keep your eyes on the road!"

But it was too late.

* * *

Two hours later, Mary stood outside talking into her Vodafone Smart Mini 8c with all the philosophical aplomb she could muster.

"Yes, I am looking on the bright side.... It certainly could have been worse, I know.... I am counting my lucky stars.... Yes, I know children are starving in Africa, it's terrible.... Ours, well, John's - *he* was driving, but I blame myself. Typical woman, don't say it.... For taking his mind off the job.... No, not like that, for heaven's sake, we *have* been married fourteen years! We were just talking. I managed to coax him out of his shell, got him to open up a bit, but he's so tired and emotional lately, and.... I don't know why.... Of course I've asked him.... He says he just wants some space and some time.... What do you mean, 'Married men are all the same'? You've only just tied the knot, how would you know? ... Of course, third time lucky, yes! Sorry, slipped my mind. Congratulations, by the way. I really am sorry we couldn't make it and I hope you'll be very - Oh, look, I've got to go, sorry, the ambulance has *finally* arrived, that's what we've been waiting here for.... Yes, like I said, we're both fine, not a scratch.... For the *other* driver.... I'm not sure. Alive anyway.... Yes, it is a shame. The AA man has been ready to give us a lift for a good hour now, but we couldn't not wait, could we? ... Oh, they've been and gone. Short staffed, they explained. Apparently you can make more in private security.... No, not a bit cold, we're inside a pub - well, right now I'm on the outside, to be completely honest, open and above board, but that's so you-know-who won't overhear - anyway, it's a

Vintage Inn, you know, absolutely no horse brasses, lovely fire, another blessing to count. There's even a perfect view of the crash site through the window.... No, the police thought it best not to move him. John took a drink out. Anyway, got to dash, enjoy your honeymoon. Bye."

Mary felt uneasy. Her friend Louise had planted an unsettling question in her mind. Had she too got a typical married man for a husband? In words of one syllable (with one important exception), what did John *really* mean by "space" and "time"?

Mary was not by nature the jealous type. She was firmly convinced that a good relationship should be based on trust. Nonetheless she would have preferred it if John could have agreed to use his extra space and time in her presence, or at least in the house. That, in her opinion, would have been a reasonable *quid pro quo* for the concessions she was making. But he had flatly rejected her proposal.

On the other hand he was not actually going out any more often than he did before, which was two to three times per week, excluding working hours. He seemed to be satisfied with having more space and time *in principle*. At any time, however, principle could turn into practice, a fact which meant that Mary was living, on the plane of emotion, from day to day. And being the kind of person who liked to be able to plan for the future, she was not comfortable with feeling insecure.

She went back inside, having consumed quite enough fresh air for one day, then returned pensively to their table.

"Are these dead?" said a buxom girl, who was already gathering up their empties. The turn of phrase, so nonchalantly intoned, brought home to Mary the fact that she was after all lucky to be alive. It did not cross her mind that this might have been the onset of shock, hence her mood improved.

“Not a bad pub,” John pronounced with masculine authority, primarily to the AA man with whom he was bonded by common sex, as they prepared to make a start on the long road home. “One of the oldest in the country, according to mine host. A thoroughly decent brew too. Interesting name, The Turning Worm, I don't think I've come across that one before.”

“It's associated with a story, so they say,” said the AA man. “It used to be called The King's Head, or maybe it was The Queen's Arms, I'm not rightly sure, but it's not material. About fifty years ago, the landlord of that era decided to change the name to the one you see before you now. Not long after, he murdered his wife.”

“Oh, the poor woman!” Mary interjected, with a rush of empathy.

“How?” John inquired, remaining objective.

“Now that's the interesting part of the story, because no one ever found out how, dig as they might. Whatever he did, he made it look exactly like death by natural causes, so the main evidence against him was that sign.”

The three of them looked up at the inn sign. It showed a large brown worm doubled back on itself, in a field of longish green grass, and a single distant bird in the sky overhead.

“The bird,” continued the AA man, “is an allusion to the old saw, ‘The early bird catches the worm’. He painted it himself, they say, not only to foreshadow the actual crime but also to make a kind of wry comment on the struggle for resources than underpins the survival of the fittest. It's a well-balanced composition to my eye, but I'm no expert. As for the wife, by the by, she was dead but wouldn't lie down, in a manner of speaking.”

“You mean the pub is haunted?” asked John.

“So they say, but, speaking on a more personal level, I don't believe in paranormal phenomena. To my

mind, the ghost motif in the tale is more symbolic than literal, although I'm no specialist on the subject."

"Symbolic of what?" John asked. Mary noted his interest with interest.

"Guilt. If you've read Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, you'll catch my drift."

They stood watching attentively as the other driver was lifted into the ambulance, on a stretcher. John and Mary wished him a full and speedy recovery, then climbed into the AA National Recovery truck, after pausing briefly to sadly survey the wreck of their one and only car on the back. As they drew away from the sleepy hamlet where they had just passed a small but not insignificant portion of their lives, the AA man picked up where he had left off.

"Yes," he said, "once married, always married, in a certain sense. There's many who'd like their freedom back, but it's not within the bounds of possibility, not one hundred percent, that is, not to my way of thinking, no. And it stands to reason, if you're not one hundred percent free, you're not free full stop, are you? I'm not speaking only of murder, I'm speaking of divorce too. My ex-wife's been haunting me for the past ten years. She can't let go emotionally, you see. It's a question of the psychological investment she made plus the fact that she's unable to negotiate the disbelief phase of the mourning process. She needs to get in touch with her true feelings so she can work through the pain and anger involved. But she keeps bothering me instead. Still, people are like that. How many of us really know what's best for us?"

"That's true," said John sadly, "all too true."

"All the same, life's a journey, isn't it?" said the AA man, as if he sensed the need to lift John's spirits. "We may not know where we're going, but we'll get there in the end just the same."

'33, Kitchener Grove, SW19,' Mary thought to herself. 'There's no place like it.'

TWO

A truth universally acknowledged is hard to come by in this day and age of multi-culturalism and, more to the point, student-centred learning. Relativism rules. Nevertheless, one that comes at least into most people's minds, when circumstances have gone beyond one's control and the quality of life seems to be fast ebbing away, is that *life goes on*.

Mary felt inclined to point this out to John, a few days after the accident. He seemed more down in the mouth than ever before. But the Volvo had been an old car, after all. They could afford a new one (on the never-never, that is). The odds were that he would lose his licence, but living in London he never drove to the office and she could take over the wheel for any excursions. As for the other driver, as fate would have it he was not too seriously injured; in all probability he would be up and around in a week or so. Last but not least, they had providentially taken out their insurance with one of the reputable companies, so there was nothing to worry about on that score.

"There's no use crying over spilt milk," she began decisively. "I know that PTSD is as real as it comes, to the sufferer at least, but in your ca..."

The way he looked up at her stopped her in her tracks. It was the tormented look of a lost soul.

"What is it, John?"

"I think you'd better sit down," he said.

She did so, keeping her eyes fixed interrogatively on his face. Then he stood up, turning his back forebodingly to her.

"I don't know where to begin," he began.

“Begin at the beginning.”

“For Christ's sake, Mary, this isn't a story. This isn't some cheap novel. This is life! There is no beginning! There's no end either! It's all the middle! Life just goes on! We're forever in the middle and... well, it's as though I've forgotten how to swim, because I can't seem to keep my head above water.”

Mary wondered if he was aware of the mixed metaphor. Probably not. The urge to unburden himself must have been overriding all other considerations. She decided against bringing it to his attention.

“Life is what you make of it,” she pointed out instead. “In any case, swimming's much like riding a bicycle. You don't really ever forget.”

But this fell on deaf ears.

“You've done nothing to deserve this,” John went on, suddenly calm and collected. “You've been a tower of strength. But a shoulder to cry on is – sorry, but I have to put this most emphatically – *not* what I need.”

He paused. Mary assumed, initially, that this was for dramatic effect. John was an accomplished, although unaccustomed, public speaker. Dutifully, she shifted her weight towards the edge of her seat. But the pause was lasting too long. He seemed to be stuck. She imagined him repeating ‘*not* what I need, *not* what I need,’ inside his head.

“What *do* you need?” she prompted, sufficiently rather than most emphatically, not wishing to sound sarcastic.

“There's the rub,” he said. “I've got no idea. Not in the sense of specific, well-defined, achievable goals.”

“Not the slightest inkling?”

“Not even that. But...”

Clearly he was back in control of his pauses. Mary noted her cue.

“But what?” she responded.

“Whatever it is, it's not something you can give.”

Mary's stomach sank while simultaneously a lump rose in her throat. She felt an emptiness in between. She prepared to fight back tears, but, strange to say, the need did not arise. For some weeks now she must have been unconsciously preparing herself for this moment.

John had started so he was going to finish. "Sometimes it's necessary to be cruel in order to be kind," he said, in a tone consistent with the demands of pent-up, conflicting feelings. "You know I'm not myself these days. I'm no good for you. You might find this hard to swallow, but I truly believe I'm not worthy of you. You deserve happiness. You've suffered enough. You're still young and attractive. You need someone who can give you quality time, a soul mate to be a true husband to you. A marriage made in heaven is just like a free lunch, there's no such thing, I know that. I know that sometimes it's necessary to work at a marriage. I've tried, God knows I've tried! I'm not claiming any moral high ground, that's all yours - along with the house, of course. I'll make my own way. I'm just not the man you married. Sometimes people grow apart. That's all there is to it."

He came over to her and took both her hands in his. "I'm sorry, Mary, truly sorry," he continued. "You've given me space and you've given me time, but the space and time I need is more than lies in the power of another half to give."

At last the hot, stinging tears welled up in Mary's eyes. In a fraction of a second she had slid her arms beneath his, pressed her palms against his manly shoulder blades and laid her head upon his masculine right shoulder, her face turned away from his neck thereby to establish a romantic rather than an erotic intimacy. In this manner she clung tightly to him.

"Do you still think of me as your other half?" she asked, hopefully.

“Old habits die hard,” he said, placing both hands on her still well-moulded buttocks and firmly tilting his own pelvis closer to hers. “In fact, right now, I’d rather like to have my evil way with you... on the understanding that it won’t change anything.”

Mary broke away, seeking further details. Nothing made sense to her any more.

“You mean... make love?”

“Why not? I hope we’re going to remain friends.”

The maxim ‘Life goes on’ came back into Mary’s mind. How much she had been through since she had wanted to cite it to John! Now it seemed more appropriate to cite to herself.

“One for the road, then,” she said, kicking off her shoes and simultaneously unbuttoning her blouse. “I’m not wet though. I’ll need a little foreplay.”

* * *

“How was it for you?” John asked, some (even a good) ten minutes later, lying on his back, still naked (ignoring shirt and socks), on the sheepskin rug in front of the radiator. His chest was still heaving gently and he held a cigarette rakishly between his thumb and forefinger.

“Fine,” Mary called from the kitchen. “What’s your poison?”

“The usual,” John responded.

She brought him a whisky and soda, and a non-carbonated mineral water for herself.

“Just what the doctor ordered. We really could do with a bar in the living room,” John observed.

Mary felt happy and warm inside. She had managed three reasonably bona-fide orgasms, good going under such emotionally draining circumstances, and John was talking about home improvements. Men are so simple, she noted inwardly.

“But I don’t understand women,” John said, his thoughts evolving convergently. “If you had just announced your imminent departure, pretty much as a fait accompli and permanent to boot, and on the assumption that I myself didn’t want to get shot of you; then you went on to suggest one last roll in the hay, more or less for old time’s sake, I’m not sure I’d be able to keep my end up if you know what I mean.”

“Perhaps I know you better than you know yourself,” Mary said with unabashed sweetness. The word “perhaps” was a little like having her fingers crossed behind her back, after all.

“The most total stranger probably knows me better than I know myself,” said John, suddenly dejected. “Oh, Mary, I feel like someone who has lost his memory – except for the fact that I haven’t. Do you understand?”

Mary had to confess that she did not. This, however, did not greatly trouble her. The John of old, the John she knew and loved, had always tended to become philosophical after satisfying his bottom-line need for carnal re-acquaintance. It was at such moments that the vast universe of unanswered, perhaps unanswerable, questions opened itself to him. She used to find his willingness to share the incomprehensibility of it all rather touching.

“I mean that my memories seem to belong to someone else. They’re not really mine. There’s a real me that hasn’t got any memories – not yet. I suppose I must be having an identity crisis.” He looked at her, then added: “There’s no need to look so worried. It doesn’t involve another woman.”

Mary had indeed looked worried at the words “identity crisis”. She had recently read about this syndrome in the *Sunday Times* ‘Style’ Magazine. Identity crises were relatively serious compared to the more common mid-life crises (with which they were sometimes confused), mainly because there were now

so many available identities out there, mostly optional, but any pick'n'mix approach to self-definition was more than likely to fall between any number of stools. Medication was not called for but professional help could often restrain patients from rashly attempting to start what they all tended, symptomatically, to call a 'new life,' with all its attendant disruptions to their nearest and dearest. Unfortunately another of the classic symptoms, or indicators, was that sufferers strenuously denied being ill in any way. Moreover, the delusion that they were the only ones who could do anything to help themselves was virtually universal, although this rarely reached the degree of deciding to write their very own self-help book. She had every reason to look worried, she concluded. And what a fool she had been to suggest he go to see someone with qualifications and experience before she had realised the true gravity of the situation. This must have been a red rag to a bull, but not quite, thank goodness, the straw which broke the camel's back, since he was not only still here in the fold, but was also finally taking her into his confidence. (Mary basked for a moment in the trust which this implied.) On the other hand she was right to blame herself for the accident. They might have been killed and it would have been her fault! She, a mere lay person, had rushed in where angels fear to tread, just like a fool! She felt like kicking herself.

During this meditation John had in fact continued to take Mary into his confidence, without noticing that their tête à tête had become a one-sided affair. In the end, he turned towards her and placed his hand sufficiently high on her inner thigh for this to be understood as a gesture of satisfied appreciation rather than simply one of close acquaintance.

"So, although sex-life-wise no problem, that's not the be-all and end-all, and the long and the short of it is that I now need to get a life – of the unhyphenated or all-encompassing variety," he summed up.

Mary apologised for having lost the thread.

“To cut a long story short,” said John, just a touch ironically (for which Mary felt she could hardly blame him), “I was saying that the accident made me realise a thing or two. A fraction of a second in extremis certainly helps to clear the mind. One, we’ve only got one life, as a general rule. Two, from where I’m sitting, I’m in the driver's seat.”

“And at the end of the day?” Mary said, resolutely encouraging him to be more explicit.

“It’s more a case of the road,” John obliged. “To call a spade a spade, I’m disengaging from the marriage.”

“You don’t mean...?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I do. One can’t cherry pick one’s nuptial delights, by definition.”

“But what about the bar in the living room?” Mary asked. A fly on the wall would have assumed she was rushing headlong into denial. Not so. Instead, she was instinctively trying to focus on practical matters in order to maintain her emotional balance.

“Wishful thinking, more’s the pity. Things like that not only add value, they help get a quick sale. And by the way, remember when I said that the moral high ground was all yours?”

“Yes,” said Mary, acerbically. So the home improvements were not to be. How little she cared about her moral superiority now! What good was being put on a pedestal and left on the shelf?

“Well, I seem to recall throwing in the house as well. Heat of the moment, I’m afraid. I can’t afford to have solvency problems. Liquidity, maybe – at a pinch and for a while. I really feel bad about it, but it’s a case of press delete. OK?”