

Gladys Hindmarch / TWO CHAPTERS

SOMETHING'S GOING ON

When I call a man an asshole, I mean it, you know: says Beebo as I come into the mess carrying three bowls of chowder. I stop at the edge of the blackboard, wait a second, then take the bowls over; put one before Jock, lift one off my right arm and give it to Lefty, and then put the third down, gently, in front of Beebo. Sorry Jan, he says, didnt know you were there. That's okay, I say, it doesnt bother me at all, I, I just didnt know if I should interrupt. The three are looking up at me, my voice isnt convincing but I meant it, oh shit, I cant tell them how I think. You gotta job to do, says Lefty as he starts peppering his soup. Yeah, I say and leave feeling stupid as if somehow I could do something in some other way. As soon as I'm in the galley I can hear them talking again, words, not sentences come through the racket: if that bastard; easy, lad. What's up? says Coco as she finishes shuffling the pots and starts to lay her board out to cut the corned-beef: shut-up will ya, I'm eating; I'm not going to, you. I dont know, I say to her, Beebo's mad about something: chickenshit. So what else is new, she says as she picks up her cigarettes, he's got a temper that one.

He has? I say. Oh sure, it could be about anything, cause, cause, well at least he's not moody you know like Hal. Moody? Oh Hal's moody alright, she says, and Lefty is sometimes, not very often though, and Jock, well you dont see him like we do, he's on his best behavior cause you're here, in fact they all are, but he's a dirty old man, you'll find out sooner or later, you'll find out. More soup, yells Lefty and we smile in that way that women do which indicates the talk will continue after whatever it is is done. I walk into the mess thinking of what she said and the men look

no different than they did just a few moments ago, but there's still something going on and I'm not going to find out what unless I ask but I know not to ask and they know I know or I think they do: put more clams in it this time, he says, I want lots of clams. I take Lefty's bowl which Coco filled at least a third full of clams the first time. Okay, I say to him, do you want more too? to Jock. Jock, bowl to his mouth slurping, nods no. How bout you? I say to Beebo. Just fetch me some of that French Bread, please, and a side of corned-beef, not too much. Okay, I say into his eyes. I'll have the cod, lass, none of that other stuff, just the spuds. Yes, I say to Jock, I think I've got everything right. Everything, says Lefty as I pick up Jock's bowl, yeah you got everything alright. And they laugh, and I leave.

Side of beef for Beebo, I say to Coco as I put the two dirty bowls on the sink edge. Side of beef, she repeats as I walk over to the stove. And Jock wants cod with potatoes only; fish no veg, she says. And chowder with more clams in this. That Lefty, she says as she takes the bowl and saucer, sure likes his clams; you know, she says as she scoops the little buggers out, when he's off I use a can less. It sounds alright in there now, I say to her, I dont know what it was but Beebo laughed. Beebo doesnt hold a grudge, she says, but: you're supposed to do that, cries Puppi, that's your job. I look at her, I didnt even know it was, Coco hands me the bowl with her back to Puppi and I take it: five cod full house to follow, Puppi says as she snatches the ladle from Coco's right hand, two corned-beef, right up; two beef, cabbage only, Coco says as I leave for the mess, five cod to follow.

Shit, he's one of the best sailors on the coast, says Lefty, you cant deny that. Not on this coast, he aint, says Beebo, not on THIS coast. I lean past Beebo to give Lefty his soup and again they stop talking and again Jock looks at me as if I shouldnt, no woman should, be here. As I straighten up they watch me, I feel my arm/the upper side of my body next to Beebo, want to touch him somehow, too close, and then step back feeling the connection break as I do so. I walk quickly out of the mess and go to the walk-in to get Beebo's bread. It's under an aluminum bowl of red jello which I lift, remove the long brown loaf which was bracing it in, take out the

French, then put the brown back parallel to the bulkhead, and then the jello in the slight hollow. I place the bread on the galley counter: sheitz man, Puppi says to Coco, he thinks he's smart but in the end he'll pay for it (I unhook the open walk-in door), if it's not the company (and start to shut it) the (and I miss the word cause of the click) will see to that.

She runs out of the galley with her two plates of corned-beef and cabbage leading her and it's only when she's gone I notice Jock's plate and Beebo's next to the butter ready to go. I pick up the orange cod, juice running into the potatoes, and take it to Jock who's been waiting longer than he usually does I sense. I'll have some coffee, Jan, says Lefty as Jock takes his dish, next time you're here. Okay, I say and leave to cut Beebo's bread. Use this, says Coco as she hands me the French knife, isnt Lefty having anything? Just coffee, I answer as I slice, I guess the soup was enough. How many pieces for Beebo? I ask. Oh, six or seven, he's got an appetite, that one, nothing stops him. She pours Lefty's coffee for me as I put the bread on the plate, then wipe the knife, hand it to her: where's my fishes, Puppi says; right away, Coco answers. Well I want to get through, she says looking at me with her hands on her little hips.

I feel her buttoned eyes on my shoulders as I leave with the plate and coffee for the mess: damn it, I am slow, but I just cant: where's the mustard, says Lefty, corned-beef and you aint got no mustard out. Oh, I say as I give the plate to Beebo, then lean past him to give Lefty his mug. Stretch your arm a little will yuh, says Beebo and I move back, not you, Jan, him. I look at him, Lefty, and the other him, Beebo, looking at each other. I'll get it, says Beebo and he half-rises, leans out over the table to the little shelf above the paper napkins, to the corner of it, next to Lefty, and pulls, with his big hand, the mustard jar out. I'm sorry, I say to Beebo. You got no need to be sorry, he says, unless it's sorry to be on this ship with the likes of him.

ZEBALLOS, B.C.

Coco, I say quietly. She is lying under her white bedspread with a red sweater on top. Coco. Her radio plays Yellow Bird. She turns slowly and her dark hair which forms a scattered circle on the pillow pulls up on the right side, in, falls over her nose. She lifts her head to see, smiles then smiles large: *it's you* . . . I thought. She doesn't continue but sits up. You thought what? I thought it might be Ken calling me for night-lunch. I don't understand, she gets up to make food for him?, she, she fumbles for her clock behind the pillow, I don't give a shit about him anyway, her and him, what the fuck: I didn't *think* it was *so soon*, she says as she emerges from not quite sleep but now I'd like to pinch her lips, cut them off, not her, yes her. Is something wrong? her voice is just as it always is. I, no, I came to ask, to ask you, if, do you want to go for a walk?

She says no by not smiling and looking at her legs. I'm just too tired, she says as I say: or, is there anything you'd like me to get? My voice is garbled, throat tight, I feel sorry for her legs and for me and pissed off all in the same moment, what the fuck, this is crazy, who am I to feel hurt. Maybe, she says as her eyes come up from her feet to my face, we could go for a beer after night-lunch. Great, I say hesitantly. I didn't tell you about night-lunch? No. There should be one around ten, you'll have to ask the mate before you go off. I look at her not knowing but now I know she didn't mean Ken other than he'd wake her. Just a regulation, she says, we get overtime for it, see they get a mugup every two hours when they're loading and then two hours after mugup they get a hot meal, it's part of the agreement.

Oh, I say. A quick image of chops potatoes corn flits through my head, more things to do, to peel, I'll just never get off of here, I see thick beef sausages frying and the counter is filled with more

pots, more pans. Nothing much, she says, and I come back to her — she looks young now/muscles at the edge of her eyes loose/about nineteen lying in bed on Sunday morning — just weiners and beans or bacon and eggs and soup, it's mainly a rest but sometimes one or two of them are really hungry. I should be back about when? Twenty minutes, maybe half-an-hour before, don't worry, just ask Marty or Chuckles when it'll be called. It's okay? I say. Sure, she says, there's nothing to do but set up and wash whatever mugs there are so they can use them. You're sure? Sure I'm sure, she says smiling, you better get going.

I say goodbye and step out onto the red deck. Funny how I feel about him, it was so nothing and not there except for moments, yet I hang on. The air sifts through the fibres of my skirt and top which all summer long I felt chunky in but now they seem part of me, smooth friends. I open the door to the mess and walk through the pale greenness to the white galley and pluck a piece of lemon-icinged cake off a plate on the counter, turn the corner, about to bite, but dont cause I see Ray, the skipper, see me in that second before his eyes fall into his cup. Hello, I say. He nods from his chin (a funny man from Newfoundland, alone, alone) and I pass him. It hurts you to move up to the edge even that much. My walk is tighter more funnelled till I step out onto the front deck. Sometime we'll meet, I think, but we may never and that's alright with me too.

I let out the boat air and take in the dock. Beebo stretches his arm to grab a wire, my guts lift, I feel my muscles as if they were his, holding, steadying, till Jock gets there, laughing, I connect with his belly, the three of us meet, then Hal joins us, zooming in on the towmotor, stabbing under the boards to lift. I feel my feet going up, I'm moving with him, between three men I'm enclosed in beer cases, moving over, moving away. Suddenly I'm here, just out the door, with my clothes on and a piece of cake squished through by fingers. They're there, I'm here, I don't know why. My hand comes up and I put the whole glob in: eggy-sugar-lemon glumps, I gulp, pull it down. Then I lick my fingers slowly and look around for Marty, his soft shape, I see several others, Chuckles' back particularly, but not him.

Chuckles is at the end of the gangplank facing the shed. I walk up towards him. ZEBALLOS painted black on mustard. His muscles seem taut in a way that frequently small men's do. I want to touch him under his arms, to glide down the surface of his back, to feel the bone through our skins. He turns and jumps onto the plank. It jerks up. My fingers grasp for ribs for railings. He laughs, bullets, over my shoulders, pushing me down as I squat to get balance. Our eyes meet, it is a test, he swings back onto the dock and the balance shifts. I step up to the end. He blocks me. Make me a promise. No. Buy me some beer. Garlic air shoots through gapped-teeth. I wont do that. Cigarettes? Sure, what kind? Players Plain. He sticks out his arm to help me onto the dock. I dont need it, dont even want it, but my hand goes out anyway. Numb fingers on muscle, I tighten, jump down clumsily, dont use him at all. He smiles down as I straighten, I shift away, he's not about to move. I watch his fingers wriggle in his front pant pocket, bones through soft worn cloth near his cock. I want to kiss. I feel stupid. I dont even like him. He gives me the silver and pennies and I take them lightly and without looking and move away fast.

The towmotor. Reverse. Dusty tires turning. Curving in. I stop. Can't move. Yellow metal coming to me. Jan . . . here, shouts Beebo. I snap. My body moves back, out of the way. You were alright where you were, Hal says, I'd a miss you. Not by much, I think as I flutter and stare at the plank where I was. My eyes drift slowly up him, he's smiling, no laugh or tease, at least I dont feel it, just a full wet look which waves way in. My eyes float back, guts too, hit a center, then I loosen, out, me to him, not as far in as he to me. We stay there a second then I fall back to almost the same place. I walk towards the side of the load, to get away, to get out, to go around it to where Beebo is. The empty swings swing up. Hal knows I'd like to fuck and I know he knows I know. I dodge between Jock and Chuckles then edge between the bumper of the dock and the load.

He slams the forklift under as I turn the corner. I look down so as to not look at him. My eyes come up Beebo to his belt, the edge of flesh there, to his chin. He grins. Will you fetch me a bar, Jan? Sure, I say smiling. I feel cuddly. I look at Hall lifting the load which he does without looking at what he does cause he knows what he's doing so well. Do *you* want me to get anything? I shout. All three of us exchange a teasy look. No Jan, Hal says and take it away. I follow his motion with my whole body then turn to Beebo who laughs with me. What kind? Doesnt matter, whatever they have. We stay in the ease. Something chewy or with nuts. Eatmore, I think, O'Henry, I want to hug you, Burnt Almond, Crispy Crunch. He gives me two dimes: get one for yourself too. Thanks, I say, and our eyes part. Candylovers.

I leave him, but am still connected somehow. As I move the connection spreads out and back to include: Hal, then Jock, a dog, Chuckles; Lefty, and under down in the hold, Ken and Buck; and all the machines, the winch the towmotor the trucks; and the men from hereabouts, and now, the boat, the front half of the shed and most of the dock. I step off its surface. Out of a circle. I'm alone. At last. No machines. No men. Only sounds: engine throbs, winch noises, towmotor chatters, take it away, here, over here. They touch my back, my ears, the edges of my arms as I walk up the long wooden ramp.

Bet Beebo's not a bad lover, I think as I feel the air through my skirt. He'd enclose yet I'd still be me since he wouldn't take over the way Chuckles and Hal might. And they're so opposite. Fir mountains surround Zeballos, the trees are tall, soft, green-black. I dont know if I'd like to live there, so tight. I feel Beebo's comfiness, I want to enter that, the large softness of his belly, suddenly it's Chuckles, hard, pushing down, long narrow cock, like his body, his whole motion is to hold down to fuck fast, not that coming in is fast, but as soon as *he* wants, and he stays as long as *he* feels, and I'm not there, I just lie here, being taken. I notice the rails of the ramp moving back at the edges of my eye. Not away though cause he probably doesnt know enough or care in a sense to meet that. Not that it might not happen. I've certainly guessed wrong before. It continues quite a while, he has that ego, if that's what it is, there are times I do too, perhaps they'd coincide.

The town looks like someone took a jack-knife and scraped it out of the jagged valley. The buildings are plunked down. Firs and alders could take over at any moment if they wanted to. Hal isn't like Chuckles at all. He seems more located throughout. The mudflats ahead on my right are full of driftlogs, yellow green weeds press up between. We'd be slower. More of a balance. I cant see a bed. I cant imagine a where. Our limbs kiss. Muscles full, skin cant contain. He'd control, would he. I'd probably come too soon, he might not be in, maybe not even fingering or licking, his whole body like his eyes, pulsing in and out, waves. I stop. My body seems to float ahead a step, then comes back to me. I'm at the ramp's end. I closed my eyes and can feel the mountains, darkness sinking in from above, giving out from within. Cool dark green needle branches. I could hold if I really wanted to and he could keep me there on edge. How do you know, I think as I step off onto dirt. I just do, that's all.

I walk up to the first building: a white sunporch with white curtains. No lights on. Whoever lives here sees the whole inlet. So small, I'd like more space, more colour. If I were alone, perhaps it wouldn't be, just patterns, colour, coffee. I'd read and look out and swim and bake cookies. The porch or house is part of a larger one-room building. Face on, from the road, it looks like a child's stick drawing. It's a mine-registry-standard-oil-justice-of-the-peace-coroner-marriage-death-birth-harbour-agent-for-Zeballos-Trading CO Ltd -office. Dark. George Nicholson, deputy mining recorder, agent, marriage commissioner and etc, is out. Probably down on the dock. But where are the others? I see no one on the street. No cars either, no signs, no poles, only the front steps of stores and wooden fences of houses. Steps must be for mud, winter, in any season, rain.

I skip across the other side. Corn and potatoes and green beans grow in front of a little unpainted house. I could live here, I think, as I stand near the fence. I see me pulling weeds, baking muffins, reading on the porch, washing the floor. Waiting. For what?

Waiting. I dont think it's a man. Must be, if you dont think that. It's so vague. I wish I knew what I wanted to do, to be. I want it to come to me, not I to it. I know what I dont yet I dont what I do. If things were only settled, decided for me, now what kind of out is that? Out. I want out. Out of what? Here? No. Where I am generally. I like it here, I like the boat, it's something I could do for a while without getting tired but in the all-over sense, sometime, well I'll have to decide then or perhaps it will just happen. I like things to just happen, yet in some ways that's encirclement. I lean down to touch an orange nasturtium. The petal is fluid inside yet soft out. I look up through the fence slats through the dark window and see a woman there, watching me. She has a cigar in her mouth, her hands rest on thick hips. I stand up slowly. Wave. It's her garden. Her house. I wasnt going to pick. She's so solid. Perhaps she doesnt see me.

I leave, Gravel knocks gravel. I pass a tall wooden building. Probably a bunk-house, many windows, narrow. A naked lightbulb is the only sign I can see of anyone having ever been inside. Hi, I feel like shouting but dont. A flappy noise, slow crackles in my ear. Engine sounds and gulls and a dog barking beyond it. It's loud. Now I see opaque plastic, a light inside, wooden frame veins. No shadows or bodies moving, but the skin is, as the air does, in large slow bumps. I glide past, turn about, walk through the grass to see what it is. A cookhouse. I linger — it would be so hot — then run.

I take a few steps up the road. TED'S CLIP JOINT. A guy with dark curly hair slouches in the barber's chair and reads a paperback. Stacks of comics fill the wall behind him to within a foot of the ceiling. He doesnt seem to be in the book. He doesnt seem to belong where he is. There's no inside light yet it's almost dark. His head lifts and I feel his eyes press out to the edge of me. What do you want? It's an accusation like he's not used to women. Is there a cafe here? I ask. Ted stands and makes two jerky steps. I stay where I am. The room is less than six feet wide, I can almost touch him. We look at each other and I understand, he probably hasnt been with a woman for quite a while and doesnt, yet does, know what to do. His eyes, squinched at the edges, loosen, assume a pose.

I step back from him. A dogfight starts. Down the road between the woman's house and agent's building. We laugh. It's nervous. They are both big. In the shadows I can see the shapes through the dust swell. The yowl of the down one cuts all ears. Suddenly miners run out of the hotel just up the street from us, and a kid in an Indian sweater appears out of nowhere. Then a car swirls in. I cant move. It's like watching a western, one is going to die, it is only a set, it is only a set, it isn't real, it cant be. Do you want to go for a dry one? Ted says. He's part of the picture. How can he say that now? I want to see. No thanks, my mouth opens through the film.

I turn round to there. A guy jumps out of the chevvie. Four men are conglomering on the two animals. Shouting. You from the boat? Ted says. I hear him next to me but so distant. The men grab the dogs from behind. And the yowl flattens to a whine with the bark from the other pushing out, rushing out. No. Where were we, I try to remember as if nothing has happened: I, I'm not a passenger, I say, I'm working, I'm the messgirl. I dont look at him but I feel the words move out over the top. They are apart, it's over. I turn. He hasnt been watching at all. It's as if this happens everyday. I know where there's a party later. His voice assumes. He does. He's such a confident cocky bastard.

I have to be back, I say glad that I'm not just a passenger do have some reason to be here, I, I, I'd like to get an ice-cream. There's a cafe a few doors up, he says and I look closely, he's not hurt, a relief almost, they're probably out, they usually are. Then, cause he knows I wont, how bout a quickie? So sure. No, I say and step out into the road. Do you, do you get enough to live here just cutting hair? I fix trucks and cars, he says, you might say I own the garage. I look up and down the road. A field back there, he says, I get along alright. It's not a question of money but he's taking it that way, is proud. Bye, I say, and his cocky smile reappears, not certain the way Chuckles is, but the basic quality's the same. Maybe next time? Maybe, I say, and leave.

I start along the road past unpainted and unused buildings. Strange to see such an abandoned town. From the curve in the road a truck comes towards me. Hi boobie, a plaid-shirted fellow in the crummy yells. I blush. Happy in a sense and annoyed.

Shoulders curled, I pass the cafe-hotel-pub. The cafe is empty, closed, licensed premises, chequered cloth covered tables sit with salt and pepper shakers waiting, waiting for that time they'd be surrounded by people. The men are coming back, they laugh and banter behind me. Up ahead are two old cars, early fifties or late forties. Three women unload driftwood, take it in through an open gate, place it on a porch of an unpainted house. I feel pulled to them, friendly, one looks at me, we exchange a happy look, she probably has a tough life, uses her body (she has on ankle socks and a house dress, the muscles of her calves are hard) to do, her head to manage, they most likely all have to, on very little. I cross the road and head towards the little cafe Ted spoke of.

It's a sin to tell a lie: comes out onto the street. The words pull me in: of hearts have been broken, just because these words were spoken. I'm surrounded by men except for the pincurled teenage waitress who leans on the counter. Unhidden arms and necks sit about enamel tables to my right. Open plaid shirts, clean jeans, shaved faces in the booths to my left. So be sure that it's true, when you say, I love you: their energy surrounds me, presses the ceiling, the windows. I step up to the counter, watch the waitress wipe a low shelf. The record stops. They shut up. I feel the eyes on my back. Through my skirt. No one gets up to put another record on. Her birdy head turns. Her body. Yeah? Her father they have the same darkish hair and peaky bone structure — comes out from the pool room to see what the silence is about. I'd, I'd like a cone if you have one, I say to her. We dont, she says. He is behind her, small hipped and worn out, white rag about his waist. Hank Snow goes on the box. I tell him what I want. She turns to continue wiping. And suddenly everyone is talking again.