

## Gladys Hindmarch / A BOAT STORY

### JUST BECAUSE THESE WORDS

It's past three in the morning and I cant sleep. I have to cause I gotta be up by six-thirty. I keep trying. I cant. The metal sounds of the engine go on and on and on, over and under and through me. Cant stop thinking. Cant not worry. Cant be easy. Be sure it's true, when you say I love you. Damn. I try to shake the words off, to float under the tune. Images come: Ken's blue eyes swim in and out of focus; the juke box grows large and the neon colours of its edges take over and spill into Zeballos's street (Mae West Avenue, that's what they call that, said Beebo when I got back, what a handle, eh Jan?); and the dogs fight, they have enormous tails and teeth, their teeth come towards me through the dust. I stretch out my arms to shove them off and find myself floating, floating up to, no, the song, again. I cant get rid of it.

Now I'm between the devil and the deep blue sea, cause I said girly you look good to me, I told her, I loved her, but oh how I lied, now she's getting set to be my blushing bride. I wish it would stop. I wish I would stop. What am I doing thinking about this sweet-talking bastard who made out and made promises and is afraid to tell the preacher he was drunk? what about her? how does she feel? I wonder if she believed him, I wouldnt, maybe I would want to, maybe everyone wants to, what the shit. Cross my heart and I hope to die, I'll never ever tell another white lie. White lies, black lies, what the fuck. I sit up and watch the shadows on the metal bulkhead next to me. And I throw off my cotton cover cause I'm hot. I'm next to the boiler and over the engine, what a racket, they're too cheap to fix the muffler, Puppi said, the U-Chuck's got the same engine and you can hardly hear it.

I turn over on my belly, spread out my legs and arms, and try to think of nothing. I cant. Ken again. He comes drifting towards me over mudpuddles, he grins like a five or six year old who's just learned to do something. I wish we could go back, I say. He doesnt hear me. I wish we could go back to that moment when we werent what we were before and talk about us. He splashes mud all over. I slide away. I never said I love you because I believe in love somehow and whatever we were wasnt whatever it was I thought or think love is. But what was it? Puppy love; puppies? where'd they come from? Bobby Williams, dark curly hair and blue eyes, almost exactly the same blue as Ken's, it's just puppy love, mom explained, just, just?

What nonsense. Seven years old and love. I gotta do something, I gotta get out of this. I move further to the edge of, blackness, I dont want to, I'm afraid of, I slip back and turn over and look at the shadows. They seem to dance towards each other, some merge then they break the rhythm and fold off, off like clouds into a larger whole. I trace how I got here: the job, less than a week ago, a coincidence, I wrote my last exam, took a bus downtown, got off at Main, walked into the SIU hall and Albert thought I was someone else (a coincidence, my timing, his expectation) and when I got called it was for the Nootka and when I got on Ken was here, another coincidence. OK. I say I dont believe in fate yet moments of my life and moments of others seem to have been meant to coincide and collide. I cant imagine anything happening other than what has occurred but I guess that's true for everyone, the past is what did take place and at certain moments of the present we select focusses on it that, holy cow, all day parts of the thens have been present but I never see the pattern somehow. I wonder if anyone can.

Coincide and collide. Coincide and collide. I turn onto my belly and say these words. I move my arms out, like breast stroke, and try to swim to the ledge of falling into, smoothly falling, gliding into coincide and collide, cooooinnnnnncide and collllllllllllide. The dogs. Far below me. They collide. They are pulled together by smells by heat by rhythms that can be almost seen, lines, neon coloured lines, move in and out. They turn. One jumps through it up onto me. I am being pushed over by him, his thick paws, his big brown chest. Hair in my nostrils. He scrunches me into gravel. He is huge, teeth, teeth on my throat. I cry out. I wake up crying but I'm not awake. I hear my aunt

laugh. He was only being friendly, she says. And I wake again. But, but I was so afraid, I shout to her. She laughs, she just stands up the sunlit alley with her hands out towards me and laughs. I wake again.

I cant breathe. My face is scrunched, is covered in cloth. My arms are, loosen them, loosen your fucking arms/hands, they are your hands, let go, that's it, more, that's it. My fingers very slowly untighten but still clutch the edges of my pillow. My hands hold the slip taut. I raise my head and slowly lift myself off of it then my fingers soothe it. It is only a pillow with a pillow slip, I say, only a pillow. But that dog, that moment, I was only three, keeps coming to me. I'm afraid. What of? My fingers trace circles in the pillow, they dont complete themselves, they are open at the center where they might meet. OK . . . I'm afraid of being lonely. OK . . . I'm afraid I'll never love. That's not true, that's nonsense, you will someday. I cant imagine it. There's more . . . more? I'm afraid I'll never grow up. But you are grown up, no I'm not, not yet. I've wasted so much time already, that's all I ever did at university, fiddle and worry and worry and read and write and, and, make love, and, and I'm afraid I'll never become whatever it is I'm supposed to be becoming. I feel uncertain. I'm afraid there's no me. I'm like water, the shadows, I reflect what's around but I'm not anything yet inside. But you know that's not true.

Be sure it's true. But I just keep reacting and reacting and reacting. When you say I love you, say I love you. I havent lied about that, not yet. Cant imagine what it's really like. When I make love I sometimes go out, way out and away, and when I come back this clutter is gone. But it's not love, there is almost no sharing in this, I use men so I can go elsewhere to where I'm no longer me at all. It certainly isnt whatever it is I imagine love to be, or if it is I can love almost everyman, almost everyman here I love in some way — Beebo, Hal, Chuckles, Ken, Lefty, Buck, Don — and the only one I knew before was Ken, he's certainly not *the* one, will there ever be one? just one? That's what the song says, that's what my mom says, you will know it, it will happen, it's like chemistry almost. Chemistry? that can't be IT. I just wish it were over, I wish it were decided for me, I wish I grew up in another era or place where they arranged it all. What crap. You want to believe it will happen, the love of your life, and you're just afraid it wont, that's all.

My highschool friends, almost all of them, are married and both my university roommates, married, a home, children, they are needed. My god. Is that where you are? you want to be needed? Yes. But you're needed here. Not in the same way. I get paid for it. And I can leave. And no one would miss me, would need me, really need *me*. I'm going to have to decide what I'm going to do but I dont know what it is. Even if I got married that wouldnt change, if I had kids it would, and I want to yet I'm not ready and besides that there isnt anyone. Isnt anyone. Isnt anyone. I've got to get to sleep. I've got to focus on nothing, make everything clear, empty. A map. Just put a pin on a map of possibilities, my mom suggested, and say this is where I'll go, this is what I'll do. I cant. I cant do that — what *are* they? I cant continue this way. There's almost no connection between then, the closer then, and now.

I simply must stop this and get some sleep. The now seems more like then and the university years turn in a circle. Put them away. Let them go. I lie flat and stare at the ceiling. One shadow looks like an island covered in forest. Think of it, the tree tops, the sun in the day, rain in needles, the moon at night; be branches at the top moving, moving gently (I spread out my arms) gently, with the air, the wind. When the wind blows the cradle will rock, when the bough breaks the cradle will fall and down will come baby . . . what? down? I open my eyes and the island disappears into a chasm. Shit. Nothing works. Cradle and all. Cradle and all?

I know what. I'll think of everything I like to do and put each in order then put each of the eaches in order: dancing, cooking, eating, making love, walking, swimming, listening. I start with things I like to eat — asparagus, turkey, dad's stuffing, wild blackberry pie, strawberry shortcake, lake trout — images from here disrupt: black beef sausages, oily salmon skin, grey scummy cream corn. I boil like the corn, fat heavy bubbles plop, yuk, I see closeups of broken egg shells covered in coffee grounds with cigarette ashes sprinkled on top; and the slop bucket, fat, bacon fat sausage fat steak fat chop fat everywhere. Damn it. It's covering everything. This isnt going to work at all.

I know what. I'll think of everyone I've ever had a crush on (there's a funny word, crush, crush my heart and I hope to die) and at least three things about each and maybe I'll sleep before I get to, I start with Bobby Williams in grades one, two, three, till he moved, and Ronny Wilson and Brian Grant, also in three, and then in four . . . right up to Ken. I visualize each and remember moments, games we played and things we swapped and places we had forts; I can see the general outline of each, their features, their faces, arent distinct, but their eyes are. I put each in order by grades as if report cards of my life were dropping, dropping as rain does into the ocean away. Shit on this. I turn over, huddle into a ball, and watch the shadows again.

Back stroke, side stroke, front crawl, dog paddle, floating, breast stroke like a heart, floating. Millions of hearts have been broken. Hearts everywhere, but they cant be broken unless they've loved. They beat away, pumping, bodiless, pumping. I see them in the ocean, in the alleys, on the street, in the garbage, in the tree tops. Baby and all. Not again. It's not going to work. Just because these words were spoken. It cant be because of words, maybe if they were said and not meant, that's it, to say something and not mean it but yet it becomes the real because we expect, that's the difficulty. But we cant or I cant get away from expecting because we learn so early what we do what we see what surrounds us. I'll never get away from that. Damn it. I cant get to sleep like this. Just an hour or so left. Left over till I work again. I better get up. Get out of this. I'll make some cocoa, that's what I'll do. And then maybe, maybe.