

It's Beginning to Hurt

by James Lasdun,

'Good lunch Mr Bryar?'

'Excellent lunch.'

'Sorleys?'

'No, some ... Chinese place.'

'Your wife rang.'

He dialled home: his wife answered:

'Where on earth have you been?'

'Sorry darling. Complicated lunch...'

Strange, to be lying to her again. And about a funeral!

'Tom's coming down. Stop at Dalgliesh's, would you, and pick up a salmon. A wild one? Better go right now, actually, in case they run out.'

It was July, a baking summer. He walked slowly, thinking of the ceremony he had just attended. Among the half dozen mourners, he had known only the solicitor who had introduced him to Marie ten years ago and had told him of her death last week.

The news had stunned him: he hadn't known she was ill, but then he hadn't seen her for seven years. Throughout the service he had found himself weeping uncontrollably.

The man at Dalgliesh's hoisted a fish the length of his arm from under a covering of seaweed and ice.

'How's that?'

'Okay. Would you –'

'Gut her and clean her sir?'

'Please.'

The man slit the creature's belly with a short knife, spilling the dewy beige guts into a bucket. He rinsed the flecked mesh of scales and the red flesh inside, then wrapped the fish in paper and put it in a plastic bag. It was six inches too long for the office fridge.

'Bugger.'

He went down to the stock room. There were gluetraps lying about with dead mice and beetles on them, but it was cooler there than upstairs. Uneasily, he placed the fish in the drawer of an old metal filing cabinet.

For the rest of the afternoon he worked on new rental listings. His eyes were burning when he stopped. It was late and he had to hurry to the tube station. Sweating and panting he emerged at Charing Cross just in time to get the six-forty.

On the train, crowded with weekenders, he found himself thinking of Marie. Sometimes she would sing a nonsense song in his ear, her mouth close as if she were whispering a secret. He remembered the strange solitariness of her existence in London; her even stranger indifference to this solitariness. They couldn't afford hotels so they used to pretend she was a client, interested in one of the properties listed with his firm. Every home they entered was a different world. Making love in the 'sumptuously appointed Victorian maisonette' or the 'cosy garden flat' was an adventure into a series of possible lives, each with its own reckless joys: one afternoon they were rich socialites; the next a pair of bohemian students... For three years he had felt the happiest man alive, and the luckiest. Marie never asked him to leave his family, and he had regarded this, too, as part of his luck.

And then, abruptly, she had ended it. 'I'm in love with you', she'd told him matter-of-factly, 'and it's beginning to hurt.'

His wife was waiting for him outside the station.

'Where's the salmon?' She asked.

A sudden horror spread through him.

'I – I left it behind.'

She turned abruptly away, then stared back at him a moment.

'You're a fool.' She said. 'You're a complete bloody fool.'

James Lasdun is the winner of the inaugural National Short Story Prize