

Rita's Fall

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Determination to maintain good will came to an abrupt end. And it was the eleven year old who ran. Zoe bolted, leaving the front door wide open, and the oncoming car had no chance of stopping. The girl was just there, inches away, dashing from her father's partner, and out from behind the parked van.

Later, as Rita sat beside the hospital bed, she grasped only cursory details of an exchange between Zoe and that woman who now lived with her daughter's father.

Dominic did not make himself available for confidences of any sort. He got to the hospital fast enough but, unable to be still, paced between intensive care and the canteen, and seemed perpetually on the phone.

Rita wondered if it was Marianne he kept ringing. Marianne was the one to go in the ambulance with Zoe, but as soon as Dominic arrived, moments after Rita, he had told her to leave. Or so it appeared to Rita, for Dominic understood only that Marianne yelled at their daughter, and Zoe ran.

For four years both Rita and Marianne had sufficient interest in pleasing Dominic that polite behaviour reigned.

Marianne, having fallen in love, was out to accommodate every aspect of her man. She turned off critical faculties and opened herself to like Zoe, who was seven at the time of her parents' separation.

While Rita had set herself to keep Dominic on reasonable terms, to ease his continued involvement with their daughter. She knew how well he responded to being wanted and if he remained at the centre of the girl's life, he'd probably stay generous of himself. However, if he found himself only in a

minor, supporting role, facing difficulties or criticism, he might silently slide through degrees of disengagement from Zoe, as he'd done with her.

Furthermore, Rita, was careful; convinced she needed a break each second weekend, as well as most holidays, she ensured ill will was kept to a minimum. Having vowed not to draw the child against Dominic, or his new partner, Rita said nothing explicitly adverse, at least until that night before Zoe's reckless run.

Minutes after arrival D. was on the phone, with no spare capacity for my guilt. It was I who suggested leaving but D. only nodded, not even asking what I'd said to Zoe. D. continued to call people, who then ring here, and I sit on the floor hearing their awkward or gushing messages.

With my tongue sliced there is nothing to say – all chat having drained away. I am the one who shouted. Or did I? Certainly I finally spoke out.

I am now silenced by shared anguish over Zoe – there can be no other voice in the face of her terrible plight.

Her parents sit side by side – united in concern. I am the one alone facing what I have done.

It is Rita who is with him.

On day two, Dominic finally sat down at Zoe's bedside so Rita could go home for a quick shower and change of clothes. The flat felt empty and too quiet.

The phone sounded especially loud and Rita sped to it. A man was speaking. She couldn't place him. He began saying "Sorry to tell you", and "dead", but it couldn't be Zoe.

Rita, unable to answer, found vile, animal noises coming out of herself. She dropped the phone and ran from the room. After vomiting and a second shower she realised it must have been one of her stepfather's sons letting her know of the old man's death.

From the hospital she rang the stepfather's number and his son was profoundly apologetic at having given her such a shock. Rita could not explain, she just asked for funeral details.

It was Dominic who took over and told him Rita was unable to attend, their daughter remained in a coma.

Dominic turned back to Rita to ask which of her stepfather's possessions she would like.

Was he really asking her that?

Had he forgotten everything?

At last she could have absolutely nothing of her stepfather. He could rot! He would rot, and the main thing was that he'd not go in the same grave as her mother. Finally there could be clean lines of separation.

He had only touched Rita's breasts a few times, it was more the threat of his sexual attention which slime covered her adolescence.

It took Rita too long to realise that her younger sister also made certain not to flaunt her obvious good looks, that she, too, kept her head down, her body well covered, making no display of figure, or face.

Rita used to say she was not entirely sorry to grow up in the predatory presence of a man too aware of virginity awaiting exploration. It meant she recognised bodies might get you into something you didn't want. Confident peers who revealed their curves and appeared reckless in asserting desirability, seemed to be pregnant, married, then frumpy in no time.

Rita sought love and had long known her stepfather quite unable to appreciate the two pubescent girls and spotty youth who came into his care, along with their mother. (It was difficult to see much attachment to his own two sons on their occasional, desultory visits. As adults those step brothers told Rita how they had felt replaced, their father too busy with a new family and mean once he took on new financial commitments. Yet in lonely old age, the father had looked to his blood children).

It was Dominic who freed Rita from a spell. When she met him, Rita dropped into melting desire and fell out of that tightness which had kept firm grip on her flesh. Having assumed a taut quality to be her permanent shape, she was stunned to discover it to be no more than a corset, which could be stripped away. After previous boyfriends offering limited pleasure, sexual ease with Dominic felt a miracle. Rita gave him full credit for her emancipation and, wanting the wonders of it to last, quickly married him.

She married the man who could not sit with her even here, at their daughter's bedside.

He appeared incapable of sharing her terror and could not give a stopped Zoe his full and quiet attention. While Rita sang childhood songs, or spoke gently to Zoe's unresponsive face, Dominic returned to his telephone. Was he telling everyone he could, passing on bad news as if to get rid of it, since it could not be absorbed?

Rita, in a furious flash, saw this man typically putting himself in the centre by ringing round all his network. She wanted to shout, "Stop! It's too like summoning for a funeral."

Why could he not hold Zoe's hand, or her own?

Rather than willing his daughter back, Dominic preferred making arrangements for meeting doctors, for work and for funeral flowers Rita didn't want sent.

If he could not make himself emotionally available to Zoe, or herself, why had she gone to such lengths to keep him agreeable?

Rage had so long been kept at bay by strong conviction that, the day the worst happened, she would really need Dominic.

When Dominic left her, Rita restrained bitching friends. Dominic was a good father, she insisted, and that would continue. He delighted in his offspring and there were claims of her own, precious strands of connection, to be protected from any unravelling. After all, she would have a child only with this man, she had lived many years with him, and he was the one with whom she discovered her own capacity for desire. It was with Dominic that Rita's life began moving within straighter lines. When she had married him and had his baby, they were carried together along the main path, one where old questioning had simply dropped away.

Dominic's leaving put her back in turmoil, and revealed marriage and motherhood to have answered too little after all.

It proved a great relief to Rita when Marianne did not rush into pregnancy. Dominic had once thrown out, as if it was not of the utmost significance, that he presumed he'd have another child.

Since Marianne was nearly thirty-three when she met Dominic, the delay could not be very long. Although this became a matter of regular concern for Rita, she asked no question whose answer might trigger an outburst she was anxious to avoid.

What was the point? She couldn't castrate Dominic, or make him fall in love with her again. She couldn't alter his intoxication for Marianne. All she might do, as she'd done with her stepfather, was refrain from declaring war.

For four years this seemed to be managed successfully. She and Dominic each said they were proud to have a friendship out of the failed marriage. Above all, Rita kept his ear open in relation to Zoe.

How often did father sing "you are my sunshine"? It must have been sung to all four of us sisters, yet each probably took him to mean herself. It must have lodged, a basic theme tune in waiting, until it began bursting from me as I lay in a bath, or sat in traffic jams. It switched to endless repeat, even on rainy days, as soon as I met D.

Not at all what I expected of myself. Not that I can recollect imagining how I might be changed by falling in love.

While Rita remained cautious over what could be said, even to friends, Zoe was given birthday and Christmas presents for the intense Marianne. And the younger woman, because in love, was eager and pleasing. It never occurred to Marianne that she might have power to pull the admiring man to her side over the strain of having a stepchild or a lurking ex-wife, not yet divorced, who expected to meet him for occasional breakfasts and intermittent family dinners.

It was Rita who recognised and feared that possibility, and she waited uncertainly, sure of a shift if Marianne had a baby of her own. As for herself, there was no question of any stepfather coming into Rita's house. On that she was adamant: not for her daughter to be relegated to second class in her own home, as Rita herself had been. However, if she had to be single, there was urgency in keeping Dominic close.

After all, with Dominic's mother dead, who else would care for Zoe's best interest? Even if Rita's mother were alive, she'd not have been involved enough, the stepfather having little patience for family. He'd done his bit, he liked to assert, "it's time for enjoying ourselves before it's too late" which meant him having his wife's undivided attention. Rita's younger sister in South Africa barely knew Zoe, and regularly declared children were not for her. And her brother had his own children; besides, his wife's notion of family extended only to her own relations.

Keeping Dominic's active connection seemed a necessary insurance. Had her father, during his protracted leukaemia, faced the fact that he was leaving three, much loved children with a sweet but weak woman who hadn't fully grown up?

I loved as if love would be everything.

To go with its fast current was all there seemed to be for four years.

And how I fell out of myself, out of my worst, those old jealousies and hurts, as if early heart blood clots could at last flow free.

There is no doubt I love him still, yet shadows begin to return. Although fretting re-cycles, D. only expects, only sees, purity in me.

True, I continue open and susceptible to him, never-the-less I'm bumping back into old tensions banished by first rapture.

I try. Though when there was tenderness to spare for everything that was his, it didn't seem an effort to encompass Zoe. But D. becomes a different person when she is around. He fades from me, back to something shared with Rita, where I have no place. And, probably out of guilt, we both put up with too much.

*Then, there are two households for him to help support. Is that his reluctance to help pay for IVF? Or the worry over how long I might stop working if a child happens?
And now this complication of a nearly irresistible job offer.
But moving so far away?*

*Perhaps D.'s exasperation with his child opens a gap for my own.
When D. and I share joys there is no impulse to record, but these pages take my qualms over Zoe. Here reservations can be shaped, yet not dumped on D. He does adore her but can I? There used to be hope and allowances made for her, until reluctance sprouted and grew.
I must have taken for granted something fruitful would accumulate from hours, days and weeks spent trying to ensure she felt welcome and enjoyed.
False expectations got dashed on my birthday – the fourth with her around, my fifth with D.
Her tone as she deposited a present, undoubtedly bought by Rita, made it too obvious she didn't owe me. The soap was the kind you never buy for yourself and smelt wonderful, and I was not ungrateful, but why would I want Rita pandering to my body?
Especially since its delivery might as well have been a slap. Zoe dropped it, unwrapped, on the table. The hard noise of impact made me start too visibly and she smirked.
If the child doesn't wish to give, the gift is only a gesture from Rita, one I'd rather do without. The delivery warranted no ceremony, and this from a family setting great store by the presentation of even small purchases. How many hours have I spent with Zoe making cards and decorating wrapping paper for D.'s summer birthdays?
Zoe knows her mother will not discourage minimum regard, and that, provided she doesn't overdo the nonchalance, D. won't challenge her.
Not that I imagine Zoe able to conceptualise her attitude towards me, or what she can get away with, so even if I felt I had any right to confront, she would look blank and uncomprehending.*

Yet I could not take him so far from his child by accepting the new job. Then she would have good reason to blame me.

Although D. seems more ready to consider moving, and begins speculating about starting a company.

Rita never wanted a stepfather after her own father's death, yet couldn't hate the one she got with visceral satisfaction the way her brother did.

Partly Rita's mother drew the two daughters into her high anxiety and complete certainty that she could not manage solo: the new man then became entwined in something thickened and gluey.

Even before the father died, their mother's bitterness spread over her daughters like fungi. She married to have one who would be strong and able to support her, and she was let down. How could she work? Let alone work and bring up three children. Having never expected to earn her living, it was impossible to begin without lowering herself.

Rita and her sister could do little except vow to be self-supporting when they were grown up. As children they didn't understand that they were being left in a good house, with the mortgage paid off by insurance, and a regular income that could be sufficient.

Perhaps the stepfather found these attractive, certainly they were a step up for him who had never owned a home. He cared not much for his new charges, except that he liked his little woman to need him, and part of her helplessness was feeling incapable of coping with children on her own. What he did want was to be boss; what he said went. He liked to declare, and that included pronouncing how he saw the children. Total agreement was assumed. Loyalty was a big word for him and meant allowing no other shades of opinion, certainly not a wife's differing perspective. It was certainty and a battle for it which suited him. He was ready to claim bodies and minds as if they belonged to him.

Rita, who grew up longing for the more subtle and loving eyes of her father, instead of carping and fault finding, feared Dominic seeing his daughter through another woman's critical gaze. If he slipped from discussing Zoe with her, Dominic might be drawn into just becoming Marianne's ally, sharing Marianne's view of what he should give of himself and his resources.

She also knew that Dominic saw only what he lit up by his attention. Unstinting warmth was unlikely to follow if you fell into the shadows behind him; Dominic rarely chased anyone.

Rita's own life might no longer revolve around Dominic, but she determined to keep Zoe in his orbit.

During the marriage she accused him crossly. "Out of sight, and we drop out of your thoughts," might not be entirely fair, yet he did not hold the child in mind as she did. Flesh of her flesh, they remained interlocked, and separation would be a long process. It was different for Dominic and he responded best when he was the light of their life.

His mother knew not to rely on Dominic's sense of duty, and from time to time was explicit about wishing to see him and how he pleased her. Rita felt prepared to do something similar after Dominic left. And, till the night before Zoe's accident, she did not speak against her daughter's father.

This wintry sky, too white and grey, held up as if a backdrop, pushes our camellia outside the window to the foreground and puts us centre stage. Deprived of a usual opening and expanding view of promise, we're locked in some limited scenario.

If only sour and stony fruit can grow from this grafted family tree, is my time and energy being wasted? I'll never belong in that unit. D. and his daughter leave no space for me.

Every cell in me pulses with hormones, crying out for a pregnancy. If there cannot be one of my own to love, can I go on being magnanimous to Rita's? Why does she, and her child, assume I should be hospitable and kind? Haven't we all read fairy tales?

Older friends say, 'typical adolescent, don't take it personally', yet something in me collapses these days if Zoe is around. Perhaps it is only foolish hopes of mine which have crashed, nevertheless a dreaded emptiness now lies in wait and I drop in, disengaged from where I once put my heart.

When I seemed all of a piece and concentrated, the full force of desire mobilised, I could embrace his ambivalent, prickly child.

With this craving for his child, a baby from our life together, that older girl stands for the mothering I can't give. She doesn't need, or want it.

The thing I most long for, a baby with D., remains the prerogative of another woman.

And he does not share this urge for me to bear his child. That came as a shock! We seem so close, yet can be far apart. D. is not yearning for my pregnancy. He's been through that already and prefers our life together away from demanding offspring. As an only child himself, he only wanted one child with Rita, then having Zoe took her over: she was no longer there for him.

Things begin to splinter.

If falling in love seemed to make me whole, failing to conceive fractures everything.

Hurt breaks through our happiness whenever Zoe is around, and she has sniffed this out better than Dominic: she senses I am weaker than I have been. She keeps in close. Not out of any attachment to me but from a need to be in head first wherever her father goes. It is increasingly intrusive – no longer an endearing, seven year old adhering to her daddy, but a resentful, developing girl doggedly keeping firm hold of claims on him. There is no room for me in there.

Am I, step by slow step, heading towards feeling prepared to take this job and risking that D. may decide not to join me? Only two more weeks for us to make up our minds.

But how? Where is any flash of clarity? That bright, fresh lucidity passion generated now escapes me and I am left instead with tired thoughts on tracks, going round and round, getting nowhere, only gathering frustration.

I am not one who visibly stamps a foot to crush daisies, yet I am back to surreptitiously grinding them underneath high heels. Since any urge to exterminate is clandestine, D. fails to see that in me. For him I'm all on the side of life and he'll protect, keeping away that brutal world of difficulties. Too willingly he takes up what should be mine; as long as discontent is vague, he assumes his love and strength must triumph. He expects to overcome old dissatisfactions with my own character and limited abilities, and sometimes he does!

But what might happen if I shared with D. how far disgruntlement now focuses on his daughter? A child who is part of him and his history, and not of me.

Rita was not sure why she agreed to Dominic's choice of name, but the child so grew into Zoe that soon there was no separating her from what Dominic chose. He liked to say, his daughter went from Z to A, his surname being Adams.

When Dominic was at school, much was done alphabetically by christian or surname, going forwards or backwards, and Dominic convinced himself that if you couldn't be first you might as well be last. Zoe shared Dominic's wish for the limelight, only she went more assertively after whatever she thought she wanted. Zoe had a ruthless streak which made her mother hesitant: just how far might she go?

It was one morning before their marriage had ended, while eating toast with Dominic, that Rita registered the word 'but' had become stuck in her. Dominic had not complained about the excess of 'but' recurring in every conversation, it was Rita who suddenly felt fed up with its too frequent appearance. The word simply rolled out of her, getting some grip on her heart, not just her tongue. 'Yes, but' was not the language of love Dominic appreciated, and Rita knew it. Equally, she felt wounded at being driven from an opened heart and being unable to find some way back in. She'd expected him to be grateful when she went back to work following Zoe's birth; after all Dominic had wanted it. Rita hoped he might admire how she coped with so little let up in practicalities, yet far from appreciating how she managed work and child, Dominic drew back. 'But' seemed to fill the empty gap for Rita, while Dominic saw fewer smiles and heard too many demands. He had enjoyed years of Rita waiting for his daily returns, ready with attention.

As Rita gradually acknowledged the full extent of her own 'buts', she decided the two of them needed time away, and his mother agreed to move in with Zoe. However, the day before they were due to leave for Morocco, the older woman fell and broke her hip.

When Mrs Adams finally died, ten months later, Dominic suggested separation. A break in which to re-find whether or not they wanted to be together.

The marriage had not been her priority, Dominic said, and Rita wept at her own folly.

'It is not anyone else,' he also said, 'this is about us,' and she believed him.

He claimed a need to come back to feeling properly alive, following his mother's death.

Rita knew she'd often told friends how her married life had become all effort, that softness simply vanished once the cushion provided by Mrs Adams was pulled out from under them.

Rita had relied on her mother-in-law for solid help, as well as for love, then, instead of being a help, Dominic's mother became a drain on energy and time once regular visiting was required.

Also Dominic seemed to be with his mother far more than might have been expected, and seemed preoccupied when he was in the house..

It did not occur to Rita that while her hands were too busy, Dominic was falling into the tender and available arms of another. What she did know was how far that thick pulse between herself and Dominic drastically thinned. The oxygen in both their lives seemed reduced and there was heaviness in the air. How could they avoid such weight if the woman they all loved and didn't wish to be without went from one collapse to another and was not going to recover?

Dominic's mother, once sharing Rita's delight in Zoe (a more comfortable love to share than that for Dominic) had become a sustaining pillar and Rita grew fearful at the prospect of being without her. There was a further dread of losing double yet again: after Rita's father began deteriorating, they also seemed to lose a mother. Rita's anxiety settled on apprehension that she'd fail to keep Dominic once his mother died.

Although frail, Mrs Adams remained sharp and shrewd, and what she said could be unnerving. Rita had pictured her mother-in-law as a woman who found thick fog deeply satisfying, since in fog everyone else became reduced to her own perpetual state of not seeing clearly. Mrs Adams said she was able to take in detail only when something stood stark and straight in front of her. Nevertheless this woman, with the occasional penetrating gaze, must have seen more of her son's marriage than she'd let on.

Opening her eyes one day, she turned tenderly to Rita, 'it was a joy, my dear, to watch you grow into showing your face at its most lovely. Don't let that slide until you have to.'

Another afternoon, Rita began to leave, assuming her mother-in-law asleep, and was stopped by a very weak hand. 'He can't do what you can, in putting yourself aside as much as you do for all of us.'

Maybe it's a man thing, or that he was the only child, but Dominic needs to feel central to his woman.'

She died, with Dominic beside her, before Rita saw her again.

Dominic's revelation that he had turned from her only gave substance to what Rita almost knew and had been unable to face.

'It's a flight into life,' one friend declared, 'people often have affairs following a death.'

Another was quick to assert, 'If he didn't dare admit it while his mother lived, his own conscience is against him. He'll be back.'

However, Rita discouraged free-for-all criticism. Probably she wanted him to return. What was definite was dread of Dominic finding any excuse for pulling thin his ties to his daughter.

Apart from that all was murky. Feeling abandoned dragged Rita down and down to deepest, dark water and old terrors, where nothing could be thought, nothing seen.

On the not-worst days, Rita could nearly assume total defeat might pass eventually.

Oddly, to be relieved of Dominic's close scrutiny seemed a blessing. It had to be a solitary struggle. Besides, Dominic had disliked her tears. The best he could do through the marriage was to bring cheese on toast if misery overcame her. As soon as she recovered equilibrium sufficient to make it coherent, Dominic liked to be told of high emotions. Provided she could contain them in a tale, Dominic was there to hold her, ready to stroke her hair.

Rita used to say proudly how Dominic turned her into a storyteller of the grisly past, and it cured her of excess agitation. By the time she had Zoe, Rita, if not exactly calm, had mastery enough to put much of herself aside for the baby. It took considerable exertion to push anxiety to the back seat, instead of allowing it to drive her, and Dominic seemed to value her effort. Rita believed they shared pride at their marriage outwitting the weakness in herself, yet three weeks before Zoe's sixth birthday he told Rita she'd grown too self sufficient. Although he didn't use the word 'hard', she felt that was what Dominic meant.

As they read up on Morocco and planned a trip, Rita had no idea Dominic was about to meet the softer, flowing emotionality of a woman ten years younger.

When Dominic began to totter on that pedestal his daughter once erected for her father, a wave of foreboding returned to Rita. She knew that Dominic did not fight for love: as soon as she had too many 'buts' he turned gradually to steel and cut away from her.

It was into this that Dominic threw inflammatory news. Typically Zoe got herself into the centre, and as the structure toppled it was on her that it fell hard.

She should have been alert that Dominic might offer dynamite. Why else invite her out to dinner without Zoe? Yet Rita went ill prepared.

It was on leaving him that she tripped on the street. A trivial fall, no bones broken, only self-inflicted damage where she kicked and kicked the wall beside the place she fell.

In a molten stream of eruption, every wound Dominic had ever inflicted, along with many that had nothing to do with him, flowed into fiery hurt. And Rita kicked until embarrassed by her own fury. It surprised even herself, for she had been telling friends that too little could flow through her these days since she'd grown globby; in not having sex she flattened and thickened.

Rita might have exploded when she heard his plans with Marianne. But far from lashing out at the dinner table, a chilly withdrawal came over her, which left a breach for frigid questioning.

Why at fifty would he want to begin parenthood all over again?

If he was going off to Edinburgh and setting up a new business he'd have to work long, hard hours and couldn't possibly also deal with broken nights at his age. He'd always liked his sleep.

As for the indignities of IVF and the risk of a multiple birth, if nature wasn't on their side, why set their will to overcome it? After all, becoming a parent had not once been his priority.

Rita quickly regretted asking anything: Dominic's response was far too galling, and she could not think how to stop him. Instead she turned rigid, while he over-admired Marianne's precious sensibility.

Having had to give up her own attachment to being thin-skinned and temperamental during those years with Dominic, her own specialness entirely shorn off by his no longer loving her, Rita listened to him extolling the wonders of the sensitive and ardent Marianne. Rita might have been reduced back to the ordinary but not this 'real woman', who had been head hunted for an amazing new opportunity in Edinburgh. Of course she must take it and he would go. They would marry and leave. If there was also a baby, perhaps he'd get a chance to be the houseparent this time round. Starting his work would wait until Marianne was well settled in to hers. Zoe had more life of her own at weekends now and was quite old enough to travel up for holidays.

Once back home, Rita subdued her urge to scream and scratch, but Zoe heard muffled crying from under the duvet. Rita's foot was throbbing, yet she had inflicted no wound on the marvellous Marianne, or on Dominic.

She had no intention to break her own rules, however, when Zoe pulled back the covering Rita wept grievance at Marianne's determination to have Dominic for herself, whisking him away to start another family, whatever obscene procedures were required.

Exactly what she let out Rita could not recall, she simply rued having spoken a single word.

Rita knew Zoe had a scornful tongue. Apparently, Zoe had been on the phone, talking too loudly to her best friend, one whom she expected to giggle with right through life. Foreseeing no other consequence than the shocked tittering of her friend, she was blunt and forthright. Maybe the reception was bad and she spoke loudly, although Zoe obviously had no wish to whisper or to spare her father's partner. Zoe passed on what she had absorbed from Rita, disparaging Marianne's fertility and called it disgusting that she wished to bind Dominic to her with a brat he didn't need at his age. The girl on the other end was not an especially coherent witness, for she was listening when Marianne interrupted the flow and Zoe ran with the phone still in her hand – the friend heard the impact of the car, and started screaming.

If what I'd hoped had proved true, that might have returned me to enough expectation to see me through. But D. rang that morning to say he couldn't get back for hours, just as I started bleeding, ten days late.

Could I have borne Zoe's spurning insolence on a better day? I don't believe Rita bad mouths me exactly and Zoe was always haughty rather than openly hostile, yet whatever I give to her, a blockage is in place to prevent it being meaningful. And I crave to give to a receptive child, taking over my heart. Rita's girl sucks up time and care, as if I am obliged to provide domestic comforts and pleasures, though she wants nothing further of me.

It is now so obvious, I can't believe I didn't take it in much sooner.

When Dominic said, "she has waited over five years," Rita registered the blow. She had half known he lied four years earlier, when he said their separation was not because of Marianne. He seemed unable to realise he'd delivered a whacking wound, by confirming he had been with a mistress through his mother's slow dying.

Yet Dominic aimed for sympathy: Rita, being a born mother herself, surely must comprehend the despair of another who longed for motherhood and failed to get pregnant. Didn't Rita often talk of female solidarity?

Confronted by an implacable, stone face, Dominic realised he had not drawn Rita. He heard himself overplay Marianne's passion as full-blooded life. He skipped a beat and took a worse turn, saying because Marianne was floundering, he needed to be solid strength against which she could weep. He would also be the decisive male, resolute that they should go.

And he must offer Marianne marriage. That was the tricky matter Dominic had in his pocket, along with a ring, which he brought to this awkward dinner with Rita.

Dominic could not shut up: Marianne deserved the full protection of marriage after five years, he said, besides it seemed a preferable option to going along with IVF. He remained reluctant to take that route.

Dominic didn't seriously imagine Rita would agree they ought to complete the final stages of a drawn out divorce, so he could remarry, yet when he found himself unable to put the matter straight down between them, on an attractive dining table, he took up special pleading. After all Rita had proved astonishingly conciliatory as they moved along, step by step, through separation. Weren't they now friends who knew each other well? And despite two miscarriages before Zoe, Rita had been lucky with conception, so might feel for one who wept each month as blood wiped out high hope.

Dominic only half took in that Rita had snapped, what he registered was how strong that cold, hardness of hers had become.

Rita didn't finish her dessert. As she walked out, it seemed incomprehensible that the same man, who forced her from any self-indulgence by so disliking tears, was parading Marianne's vulnerability as a virtue. In her mid-twenties, when she and Dominic met, Rita too was regularly swamped by tidal waves of emotion. It was Dominic who had been the incentive to move towards taking responsibility for her own distress, instead of passing it on like a child. It had been a long haul.

'Poor Marianne', Dominic said and Rita stood up. She hated him thoroughly and, finally, could walk away, prepared to risk any repercussions.

As she wept and kicked the wall Rita thought she had nothing more to lose.

Marianne packed and wrote a note. She could not imagine their love surviving Zoe's traumatic dash. And she must be held responsible for an outcome that could not be forgiven.

Of course, she hadn't wanted Zoe harmed, even so Marianne now recognised that she could not be a loving stepmother to a semi-grown girl too set on resentment. She'd given her much of herself already, yet it had not been a gift Zoe particularly wanted. The girl simply took because she could. Like Rita and Dominic, she assumed Marianne should offer up time, energy and good will.

If Marianne could not continue as before, she was not the partner for Dominic, who, come what may, had this daughter to care for, as she did not. Zoe was tied to him, that was the package. Where love would have flowed for her own baby, she could not share Dominic's for Zoe.

Dominic stood in the hospital window, taking in a red horizon, with sheer blue still high above it. The crisp sliver of moon, was no more than a captured picture behind glass.

'That is it,' he thought. With Rita everything had become at one remove and framed. She never had faith in him, or if she had, briefly, it certainly didn't last. Rita did not trust love might sustain long, long before Marianne and their first meeting, which had given each of them such a surprising spasm of recognition.

Marianne believing in him left him light. She wasn't perpetually hedging bets, or convinced he would not behave well unless organised.

Marianne knew he held Zoe dear; however difficult she became, she was the one he must cherish as best he could.

Suddenly, Dominic felt a longing to hold Marianne. He was desperate to be in her arms and making love.

It was a pity his body felt utterly exhausted and unable to run all the way home to her. That stupid ring still lay in his pocket. It was no longer time for a wedding and, in any case, he would never offer that particular ring; he and Marianne together must change it.

What had he been doing? Was he so wary of Rita, that he'd felt a need to entice her on side?

Marriage to Marianne might have to wait but making love could not. And, of course, Marianne must have his baby! Dominic's reservations, about sperm in bottles and hormones taking over Marianne's body, evaporated as he imagined their hope and happiness renewed through pregnancy.

He could barely wait to tell her he would do everything and anything required for her to have his child.

As Dominic walked beneath the expanding sky, the crisp, bracing breeze touched his skin, after three days of hospital heating.

In this fresh opening, he could truly believe in his daughter's recovery, as well as in the swelling of ardour for Marianne.

He savoured a glint in the moon and a bite as night air caught on his throat.

He hurried home towards her note, and her departure.