

1 Creases

A man and a woman met and became lovers. She was big and strong, with long lithe limbs, brown eyes that never flinched, a large mouth and hands that could have made a comfortable nest for a bird and its fledglings. He was tall and thin, though not too thin; he never felt ridiculous when they walked hand in hand through the spring-singing park. His eyes were green and rather close-set; when he smiled the laughter-lines fanned out to the temples, and the lips stretched across his face like an elastic band. She teased him about his nose, but this was only to balance the painful pleasure of seeing the laughter-lines. She loved him and he was in love with her: in a constant state of excitement, he drove into her almost before the first kiss had passed between them, and no sooner had he been satisfied inside her than he saw the long legs and the brown eyes and felt himself rising once more. She received him and loved him. Sometimes when he had exhausted himself and lay asleep next to her, she would trace with her eyes the thin lines around his eyes and anticipate the moment when he would wake and the smile would bless her with pleasure. Other times his touch along the length of her long body would turn her to a trembling leaf. Until she realised that he did not like her except when still and strong, and she steeled herself and trembled no more.

By summer they found their love was magic: she seemed to have endless powers of transformation, moulding herself to his desire as if she were clay. If he was weary of the long limbs, she watched herself become small and slight for his delight. When weary of her smallness, she grew large breasts into which he buried himself, and when that ceased to satisfy him she became a child and even a man. Only her eyes remained brown and unflinching. She had no wish that he should change, she was content that her transform-

ations should awaken the smile in his eyes and to see the laughter-lines fan out to the temples.

One day he became tired of her. He had to go on a long journey and did not want to take her with him, her eyes made him uneasy and he disliked most the tacit assumption that because she loved him he must somehow love her too. The assumption was his, not hers: he thought she thought they must love each other for ever. She did not think; she knew she loved him and would be all things to him as long as she could see his smile, but the words 'for ever' had no meaning.

He decided to put her away before going on his journey. He had a standard-sized cardboard box into which he put all things that had become useless—blunted pocket-knives, old letters—and he called her to him and asked her to become small enough to go in the box. Joyfully she waited for the change that would bring the smile, but nothing happened. She remained big and strong, lithe-limbed and clear-eyed, until the brown grew misty with puzzlement. He thundered and swore, his brows grew closer above his close-set eyes. He was angry. He ordered her to step inside the box. She curled up in as tight a ball as she could, but her head would not fit, however hard she tried to make herself less bulky. He thundered and swore, ordered her out and told her to strip. She cast her clothing aside and stepped in. He pushed her, pressed down her shoulders; she tried to bury her head, but the eyes and nose still remained above the level of the box and he could not fit the top on. He stamped his feet and ordered her to get out. She stood by the side, looking down, trying to see how he could best be satisfied this time, when he thrust her in head-first. Her forehead hit the bottom and she felt his hands; her left leg he wrapped around the back, with the foot twisted to fit in the groove between the shoulder and neck. Her right leg he fitted below the underside of the thigh and then pushed the buttocks further in. Her arms were curled against her chest and her nose was squashed and twisted against the bottom right-hand corner of the box. Quickly and deftly, as if fixing a set of batteries to a transistor, he fitted the top and took a large elastic band from his desk to secure it shut. He sighed with satisfaction and thought next day he would ask someone to help him carry the heavy box to the attic. He went out to celebrate and

brought back a girl who giggled and did not believe him when he claimed the cardboard box that stood in the middle of the room held a woman. Thinking that she might spring out at him if he removed the elastic band he resisted the temptation to prove it.

Inside she was in pain. The left ankle and foot were twisted and the tendons of the leg stretched as if about to snap. The squashed nose brought continuous tears to her eyes, the arms developed pins and needles and the tightly bent knee-joint of her right leg throbbed. She did not move: she wanted to remain there if that was his will and only wished the box had been a little bigger or she could have transformed herself into the small person who would have neatly fitted. For hours, for days, for a lifetime she lay still trying to think of other things to distract her from the pain that from being clearly localised in five places gradually coagulated and invaded her whole cramped body and then spread outward like an oil-spill to the sides of the box and beyond the darkness to the room beyond until the universe itself was pounding with it. She thought he must feel it, it was so dense, or at least hear it as it beat and drummed louder and louder in her ears, but he was merely aware that he had not yet taken the box to the attic, it was still standing in the middle of the room with its top on and the elastic band around it. He had been busy and preoccupied with preparations for the long journey, having to settle his business, sell his house and the car, invest the money to have an income with which to pursue his travels at leisure; and the girl he had brought back turned out to be a nasty bitch who wanted to be paid for every favour but would not move out, lounging around in her black and red underwear and performing sudden and obscene strip-teases to get money from him.

One day, shortly before he left, he got around to moving the box. He asked the girl to help him and because her swinging breasts were finally unable to rouse him, she agreed to, for a sum. They stepped near the box and were about to lift it when the strained elastic gave way and lashed them both in the face, the top flew as far as the ceiling and landed softly on the carpet, and the woman's left leg sprang out. The pain of sudden release was as great as the pain she had been enduring, but it was so different it felt like relief as her right leg followed her left leg, the box toppled sideways and the nose ceased being ground and twisted. She could not move and

lay there, in darkness, trembling like a leaf in a strong wind, with her naked limbs exposed. The girl giggled, but the man's brows came closer to his close-set eyes. He was angry; the sight of the exposed flesh made him rise fiercely; when he pulled her out, the face bloated by tears, the deep grooves made by the pressure of the side of the box on her skin made him, briefly, fiercely tender. He smiled at her suddenly, drew her to him, and if her body could not forget the pain, she could, and was happy to see the laughter-lines fan out to the temples.

The girl vanished within the hour, leaving the bedroom littered with underwear and taking some valuable silver that had been in the family for generations.

He could no longer treat her harshly, thrust her back in the box, yet he did not want to take her with him. Her eyes still made him uneasy and besides, she had become uglier, her limbs did not function properly, they occasionally jerked like those of an epileptic, and her long stride had become crab-like and carried them sideways as they walked hand in hand through the spring-singing park.

As he was packing the last of the ancient books he had found at the top of a cupboard, one of them fell open on a diagram-drawing of a crouched man: the buttocks were against ankles and heels, the head touched the knees and the arms were lying back alongside the pleated body. Underneath was written 'FOLDED LEAF'. The man showed the book to the woman and told her to strip again, crawl into the box and arrange herself in the position shown in the diagram. She felt the profoundest terror but was helpless to refuse to do as he wished. She wormed backwards and doubled up. The box was too narrow for her arms to lie back, so she tucked them against her chest. She cupped her face in her hands and looked one last time at the man as he smiled at her, safely away in the box. He put on the top with ease and tied a thick rope around it, to make sure she could not get out. He thought she could not feel pain: the book stated that 'FOLDED LEAF' was a position of rest and very comfortable. And indeed the pain was not excruciating this time. She found she could move slightly, arching her back to take the pressure off her knees and calves, and turning her face from side to side when the neck became too stiff; but after a while there was no real relief from the ache and discomfort. She penetrated

deep into it and closed her eyes, thinking that soon he would return and take her out of the box; and she would see the laughter-lines fan out to the temples.

The years went by. The man enjoyed a fruitful journey that made him wealthy and successful. One autumn day as he walked in a wood of chestnut trees in a far country he remembered her eyes and returned. He had trouble finding the box, which he had stored in the attic of the house he had sold. It had been removed with his other belongings to a warehouse, but in transit the label was lost, the box had been shunted from one part of the warehouse to another and finally buried under large shabby trunks and sofas and chairs and cupboards that belonged to a couple with little money and many children. The man spent a lot on the warehouse keepers to find the cardboard box. Finally it was retrieved, battered and damp, sagging where the foot of a sofa had been resting. The man took it to the large house he had made his home, and because he could not lift it, asked the taxi-driver to put it down in the master bedroom. His hands shook like the hands of an old man while he undid the various knots, and his heart-beat took his breath away when he removed the top. She crouched still as a folded leaf, with her hands cupping her face and her eyes shut. He tore away the cardboard all around her and wrapped her nakedness in the warm goose-down blanket from the bed. For days he massaged her to straighten her limbs, until she lay on the floor, her hands by her side, her legs stretched out, the body bruised and permanently puckered and pleated.

She did not open her eyes again, but one day the man got her to move and led her, her hand in his, through the spring-singing park.