

DOUBLE STANDARDS

1977

When she was twenty-two, Mary fell in love with a lecturer at the University of Lancaster called Dr Wilson. It was a close bond that made the two inseparable for the best part of a year.

Mary had been expelled from boarding school for breaking the rules. She had gone to technical college in Oxford and had a disastrous live-in relationship with a heroin addict who relied on her caring instincts to provide him with the shots he needed and on his good looks to keep her happy. She suppressed her own desire for love and affection, assuming he would eventually get better and return what she had given. But when he came off drugs he demanded even more of her time and attention, arguing it was her duty to support him and prevent regression. She spotted a bad deal and determined not to invest too much emotional energy in another man. During her first year at University she stuck to one-night stands; in her second she became a feminist, joined a women's group and battled with male lecturers to be treated equally; and, in her third, made sure her social life was as active as her social conscience by getting drunk, smoking pot, encouraging midnight outings to the Forest of Bowland and holding parties in a local pub for the progressive elite of the University.

It was at one such do, late in the spring term of her third year, that Mary met Dr Wilson. No one was quite sure who had invited her, but someone must have done. Dr Wilson was a lecturer and lecturers did not gatecrash unless they were drunk or in love. Mary suspected Tom, a red-haired economics student who considered himself too sophisticated for undergraduate girls. Certainly, when Mary went up to offer Dr Wilson a refill of wine, it was Tom

who had an arm pressed against the wall above Dr Wilson's head and a back 'protecting' her from the rest of the party.

Dr Wilson looked relieved, as in relief of a siege. Tom made the introductions.

"This is Vivien Wilson."

"Hi. I'm Mary. Mary Thwaites. Another drink?"

"Thanks."

Dr Wilson held out her plastic cup. She was a woman of thirty-five – dark haired, small in stature and fragile of build. Her face gave an impression of nervousness but her eyes had a hypnotic quality. Her mouth was thin lipped, her chin receding. The hand holding her beaker trembled, the other pulled at the shoulder of a sleeveless cashmere jumper.

"I've heard a lot about you, Mary," she said, smiling.

"Who hasn't?" intervened Tom, trying to stay in charge.

Mary put down the bottle and started to roll a cigarette.

"Really? Who from?"

"Professor Naylor."

Dr Wilson smiled again and Mary laughed. Professor Naylor was Mary's sociology tutor, a good socialist but avowed opponent of feminism: 'Don't divert us, Mary – we'll put things right after the revolution.' 'And, meanwhile, go on screwing us.' 'I'm not saying you can't be involved.' 'Oh, thanks very much!' Laughter, end of seminar and only Naylor's latest ego booster left to comfort him.

"So you know I'm the troublemaker?" grinned Mary.

"Not at all. He needs someone like you."

Tom looked over his shoulder to see if the dancing had begun and spotted Lynn, Mary's housemate. He beckoned to her and nudged Mary.

"Lynn wants you."

Mary turned to locate her friend. Tom leant across to Dr Wilson.

"Fancy a dance, Doc?"

Vivien pulled at her sweater and glanced at Mary.

"I was just going to ask Mary about..."

"Come on."

Tom took her hand and as he passed Lynn shouted:

"Mary wants a word."

Mary turned back to find Dr Wilson gone and Lynn staring expectantly at her.

"What do YOU want?"

"I though you wanted me?"

"What made you think that?"

Lynn looked hurt.

"Tom said so."

"The bugger!"

Mary shoved her bottle at the crestfallen Lynn and set off in pursuit.

She danced her way through the guests, stopping to shake a leg here and wave an arm there, until she was behind Tom. Dr Wilson smiled. Mary put a finger to her lips. Tom was nodding his head out of time to the music, his right arm quivering 'sexually', his left leg jerking towards Dr Wilson. Mary raised a hand to his head, unfurled her palm to do a karate chop and then tapped him on the shoulder. Tom whipped round.

"Sorry to disturb you. Lynn wanted you, not me."

"Really?"

Tom glanced back at Dr Wilson.

"That's fine, Tom. I'll dance with Mary."

"Oh. Right."

Tom backed off, in reverse. Dr Wilson put an arm round Mary.

"Thanks. Not my type."

They laughed and started dancing.

Later, Tom saw Dr Wilson donning hat and gloves by the door. He went over to ask if she wanted a lift home. But as he drew near, Mary appeared in an old tweed coat.

"Bye, Tom." She waved. "I'm off for coffee with Vivien."

"Oh," said Tom. "Right."

After two cups, Dr Wilson suggested they sleep in one bed.

"To keep me warm whilst my husband's away."

They were in the living room of the Wilson's terraced house with Mary perched on the edge of a Chesterfield and Dr Wilson lying across cushions on the stripped pine floor. Sleeping together was what Mary had wanted but faced with the reality she felt nervous. She had not slept with a woman before.

"Yes. That'd be nice."

And it was. The most sensuous night she had spent with anyone. Mary had learnt to get an orgasm in quick with a man but with Vivien there was no pressure. They ebbed and flowed until the early hours and then fell asleep in each other's arms.

At breakfast Mary tried to take stock and failed. She had developed a method with men of disengaging emotionally as soon as copulation was complete. But this was different.

"When's your husband back?" she asked.

Vivien looked up from wiping egg off the face of her four-year old, Mark.

"Next week. Why?"

"I just wondered."

"Don't worry. We'll be able to see each other. He goes to London every other week and usually stays away one weekend as well."

Mary gazed out of the window. In the distance, hills rose up. Mist played over their tops making the horizon hard to define. She shivered. Perhaps it would be better if there wasn't space for them; better if this new love were removed to some undefined horizon of the mind where it could be developed and enjoyed without anyone getting hurt. Real love made her nervous. She returned to her egg and cracked the shell.

"And will you tell him?"

"I don't think so. Not yet."

"Tell what? Tell what?" Mark chimed in.

"That Mummy's met a new friend."

"Mark's friend too?" inquired the boy.

Mary laughed and wondered if she would want a child of her own sometime.

"Mark's friend, too," she said.

To begin with all went well. Vivien's husband, Jack, took Mark to London more often and Mary told Lynn about the affair. The physical love developed into an emotional bond but with the freedom from responsibility that playing second fiddle brings. Mary could love and be loved without having to worry whether she was committed or not.

Then one day – six months after the relationship had started – Vivien called round unannounced at Mary's house and asked to be taken home to meet Mary's parents. Mary was hesitant.

"Why?" Vivien persisted. "Are you ashamed or something?"

They were in the living room and Mary was trying to finish an essay on 'Where is the Working Class?' for Professor Naylor. It was early in the morning and Lynn had gone to the Lakes, leaving Mary in peace to pursue the proletariat. The room smelt of fish and chips and – despite an ageing gas fire – felt damp.

Vivien moved from the fire and stood beside the table where Mary was working.

"It'd be nice to meet your mum and dad. We could go today. I'm free."

Mary concentrated on the sentence she was writing. Vivien continued.

"It'll be easier to tell them about me if they know who I am."

"I don't always tell them about my affairs. It's none of their business."

"This isn't an affair."

Mary threw down her pen. If she wasn't going to finish her essay, she wanted diverting from it.

"You're the one who's married, Vivien. I'm just your closet lover."

Vivien looked down at the table, her hand shaking.

"I'll tell Jack, then. I'll ask for a divorce."

Mary pushed back her chair, pulled Vivien onto her lap and kissed the doctor's lips.

Vivien did not resist and they made love on the floor amongst the books Mary had loaned from the library for her essay. Softness of touch on hard covers of Marx; warmth breath over cold statistics of capitalism; wetness of coming under a toppled pile of musty Morning Stars – lying and laughing as socialism reformed around their limbs.

"I do love you, Mary."

Mary felt a twinge of guilt. She was slipping out of tune with her lover – gaining power because her own love was waning.

"I love you too."

She had to pretend and her voice, her lips, gave no indication of deception.

"Can we go, then?" said Vivien, snuggling closer.

"If you like."

Mary dressed in front of the fire as the insidious power of loving less surged through her body. She shivered. People should tell each other at the first intimation of a changed balance of affection, but never did. They blindfolded the weaker party, led him or her by the nose and only removed the blindfold when the scenery had changed beyond recognition.

They reached the Thwaites' house in Halifax in time for lunch, left their luggage in separate bedrooms and went to the sitting room to sip sherry. Mary's mother complemented Vivien on her smart clothes.

"Mary wears such scruffy things."

"Mum! Vivien's a well-paid lecturer."

"I've offered to buy new clothes for you, darling."

"I don't want to be bought things."

Mary's father leant across and poured Vivien another sherry.

"Always the difficult one – Mary. Not like her brother George."

Dad smiled a lounge lizard smile. Mary scowled and mother managed.

"Shall we eat?" she said, standing up and leading the way out of the sitting room.

In the hall, Vivien took Mary's hand and squeezed it.

"When will you tell her?"

"I might leave it this time," said Mary. "Tell her in a letter or something."

"But you promised."

Mary tried to extricate her hand and head for the kitchen.

"I'd like your mother to know," Vivien persisted, "whilst we're here."

"I'll tell her when dad's gone to bed."

"With me there?"

"Yes."

Vivien gave Mary a hug.

"I can support you, if she's difficult."

But she wasn't. That night, after dad had told his last risqué joke, the women were left alone. Mary suggested coffee and went to make it. On her return she poured three cups and, as she handed one to her mother, said simply:

"Mum? Vivien and I are lovers."

Vivien prepared to defend herself but Mary's mother remained calm and said she had suspected as much. She herself had no objections though felt concerned about the men involved. She felt sorry for the husband and son having to live with the realisation that their mother was queer and was adamant that they should not tell Mary's father.

"He thinks you're a fine woman, Vivien."

She sipped her coffee. Vivien pulled at her sweater and bit her bottom lip.

Mary shook her head. Mum understood but did not approve. The feminist re-education programme would have to continue. She glanced at Vivien. Vivien opened her mouth to say something – thought better of it and left the room.

"Difficult woman," said Mum.

"I can cope," said Mary as their eyes met. She felt annoyed by her mother's hypocritical tolerance and wanted to expose it. "We're thinking of moving in together."

Mary's mother's face fell.

"What about her husband and poor little Mark?"

"Oh fuck them!"

"Mary!"

Mary bit down on her anger – directed at her mother instead of herself.

"Sorry, Mum."

She crossed the room, knelt down and laid her face on the warm lap. She breathed in the scent she had known since childhood, closed her eyes and felt a hand touch her hair

"You're not going to live together, are you?"

Mary shook her head.

A few days later, the doorbell rang at Mary's house. The sun had already set and Mary was about to go to college to hand in her essay on the Working Class. She opened the door. Vivien stood on the doorstep surrounded by suitcases and a cardboard box full of books. A taxi pulled away into the darkness.

"Can I come and stay, please?"

"Stay? For how long?"

"I don't know."

"What about Mark?"

"He's with Jack."

"What about Jack?"

"I've told him."

"Told him what?"

"About us."

"And he's thrown you out?"

"No. I've left him."

"Left him? Why?"

There was a pause. Vivien took a deep breath.

"Because I love you and I want to live with the person I love."

Mary picked up one of the suitcases, cursing herself for being a coward. She had said nothing to Vivien over the weekend, convincing herself it would be better to write a letter or phone when they got back. But she hadn't and now Vivien, ignorant of Mary's true feelings, was ready to move in.

Mary put the case down in the hall and returned to help Vivien with the books. She suggested they store stuff in the living room until rooms were sorted out.

"I'll be sharing with you, won't I?" said Vivien.

"We have our own rooms here," replied Mary. "It's a house rule – to stop anyone feeling excluded by couples."

"Oh," said Vivien.

She was used to a well-furnished nuclear unit with a shared double bed. Mary saw the look of dismay and taking her friend's hand led her through to the kitchen.

"I must take my essay into college. Then we'll talk."

She sat Vivien down at the table and put the kettle on.

"Lynn will be home in a minute. She's cooking."

Vivien nodded and Mary left the house.

At the social sciences building, she jumped off her bike and ran down the corridor to Professor Naylor's office. His door was ajar and she could hear voices. She stopped and listened, trying to quieten the sound of her breathing and the pounding of her heart. She recognised Naylor's voice and then froze as a second man spoke.

"She's one of your students, isn't she?"

It was Vivien's husband, Jack.

"Yes."

Professor Naylor sounded defensive.

"You should do something. I hold you responsible."

The sound of a match striking; Naylor would be lighting his pipe – it was always going out. Suck, suck and blow the match out.

"Look, Jack, I'm afraid what your wife and my students do together is entirely their affair. It really has nothing to do with me."

"What about Vivien?"

"What about her?"

"You're on the staff disciplinary committee."

"Yes?"

"Can't she be done for immoral conduct?"

"Not if her bedfellow is a consenting adult. No."

There was silence. Another match struck. Suck, suck, blow.

Jack came bursting out. Mary ducked behind a pillar and waited until he had disappeared. She re-emerged, knocked on the office door and entered. Professor Naylor sat at his desk, puffing the pipe and reading an essay. He didn't look up.

"On the table, please."

Mary laid the brown envelope on a pile marked 'Where is the W.C.' and began to creep out again.

"Mary. I've just been talking to Dr Wilson, male."

Mary stopped and turned.

"I heard."

"You are serious, aren't you? About Dr Wilson, female?"

Naylor still didn't look up.

"Is that any of your business?"

"You realise they've been married for ten years?"

"And?"

"Well, are you sure you're being fair? Not just taking her for a ride?"

Professor Naylor pushed his glasses to the end of his nose and peered over the top of them at Mary. Mary sat down in the armchair reserved for his favourites.

"How can *you* ask me that? How dare you?"

Naylor removed his glasses and hid behind an expression of sociological investigation. Mary continued.

"How many students' lives have you messed up? How many girls have you seduced with your position of power and then dumped unceremoniously? How many?"

"We're talking about you, Mary, not me. I'm not involved at the moment. And anyway, there is a significant difference between the occasional heterosexual fling and a full-blooded gay relationship."

"What?"

"The rules of engagement."

"The ones you make, you mean."

"Yes. But at least the girls know where they stand. I don't pretend to fall in love."

"No?"

Mary hated this man.

"No. I have a feeling you're not being straight with Dr Wilson."

Mary sprung to her feet, rounded the desk and raised her fist to hit Naylor.

"Hypocrite!"

"I'm merely trying to help. You'll thank me later."

He put an arm round her waist. Mary broke free, catching his pipe in the process and knocking it to the floor. Embers scattered across the carpet.

She ran out of the office and down the corridor, kicking the concrete wall as she went. To be told the truth by the devil – how humiliating, how bloody humiliating!

At home, she found Vivien eating tea with Lynn. They smiled and pointed to the oven where a helping of lasagne was being kept warm – two saints welcoming a sinner. Could she pretend a bit longer? Avoid the unpleasantness of a scene? Suffer herself to save Vivien from pain? She would be a saint too then, since all saints have to suffer.

She watched the new kitten, Perkins, lapping at spilt milk near the cooker.

"I've sorted out the attic room for Vivien," said Lynn.

"I won't be any bother," added Vivien.

"Vivien..."

Mary hated herself for being so calm. Why couldn't she break down and cry?

"Vivien, it's fine if you stay for a while, but..."

The two faces stared, haloes in place.

"But I'm afraid I'm not in love with you any more. I think you should know."

Silence, then Vivien started to sob. Lynn stared reproachfully at Mary and leant over to comfort the older woman.

Mary turned and ran out of the door – down the street, across the river and into the station. She was running away, running home to mother on the far side of the hills.