

## END OF THE LINE

1980

High above a Yorkshire Dale a man and woman lie side by side in the heather. It is late autumn, but the afternoon sun is still warm and they are hot and weary from the long climb. Far below they can see the grey stone farmhouse where they spent the previous night, smoke curling from one of its two chimneys. In the distance they hear the sound of a power saw revving and cutting through the silence. The woman speaks.

"I do want a baby."

"I know."

"So why won't you...?"

"I'm not sure."

"Not sure of what? It's me who has it, not you."

"I know. That's my problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I couldn't compete."

"With a baby?" she laughs.

"With having one."

The woman sits up and puts her arms round her knees; the man buries his face in the heather. It isn't the first time they've discussed babies. In fact, they talked about them again last night. He said he couldn't father a baby because his role in its creation was too insignificant, not even essential. He could understand her wanting to be pregnant and give birth because, apart from anything else, it was something her body could do that she had not yet tried. It wasn't a matter of trying something out, she said, but a way of developing her capacity for love and affection, of increasing her ability to feel

and express emotion, a way of reducing her narcissistic self-obsession, of having someone who was unequivocally dependant on her and to whom she could wholeheartedly give without being rejected.

"That's a bit optimistic," the man chuckled, as they lay together in the sagging centre of the farmhouse bed. "Children are often ungrateful. Anyway, you've got me."

"You!"

The woman raised her head from the pillow and looked round at the man, who had been her on and off partner for almost four years. He was lying on his side behind her. They had been making love and his penis was still inside, though soft and shrunken. She had come under his fingers, but let go of him as he was about to ejaculate and whispered, "Come in me!" He had entered her from behind and she had squeezed and rotated, keeping her fingers crossed he was too far-gone to worry about the time of month. But he had stopped. "No contraception", he'd said. "I know!" she'd cried. But after a final arching of her buttocks and a half-hearted probe by him all creative motion had stopped.

"You!" she repeated sinking back onto the pillow.

"I'm pretty dependant and don't reject you that often."

The woman laughed. His penis slipped out and lay pointing at the moon.

"You won't even live with me," she said, turning over and playing with the hairs on his chest.

"We'd get on each others nerves."

"How do you know? You've never tried."

"I did briefly – with a girlfriend at University. I felt swamped."

The woman tweaked his nipple, sat up and rolled herself a cigarette. The man propped himself on an elbow.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Most men long for a wife and children."

"Then why don't you?"

"I'm not 'most men'."

She jumped out of bed to fetch matches, hoping to lead the discussion down a more productive path. But, when she slipped back under the sheets, he lay turned away, breathing in the rhythm of sleep. She would tackle him again tomorrow, on the walk.

And now she has, without success.

On the far side of the dale a curlew sounds its plaintive call, a cloud moves in front of the sun. The woman stands up. The wind has crept unseen over the horizon and the air on the moor top turned cold.

"Come on," she says. "Let's go home."

The man jumps his feet forward and tries to flip upright, but loses his balance and falls back into the heather. The woman walks on, her head hung in thought.

They branch down off the ridge through a rocky outcropping and over a stream. The sun drops, touching the dark silhouette of the moors opposite. Below, woods turn gold, presaging a return to the start of things, to the comfort of death and a time before birth. Sheep move off moor tops, cows huddle in the comfort of stalls, dogs bark keen to get duties done and food before them. The air smells of wood smoke and approaching night.

The woman reaches the stile that leads to their farm. She waits for the man, who is some distance behind, walking slowly, hands in pockets. She shivers and feels a deep pang of love for her friend. They'll forget about babies

and have tea with toast in front of the fire, go upstairs and make love anyway they like. She holds up her arms as he approaches and they hug. She pulls his face off her shoulder to kiss his lips, but they remain shut, numb with cold – or thought. She breaks loose and climbs on to the style.

"Come on," she says. "I'm hungry."

"Wait for me."

He follows her over the dry stonewall and arm in arm they walk back, their boots swishing through the dead leaves, their breath visible on the air. The sun falls behind the valley wall and lights appear, dots of life in the encroaching dark. The woman squeezes his hand. He responds, but knows he will have to tell her it's over. They reach the floor of the dale where a river flows to the sea. He will tell her tomorrow, in the city, tonight they'll pretend it's all 'all right'.