

The figures of these men and women straggled past the flower-bed with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights from bed to bed. The man was about six inches in front of the woman, strolling carelessly, while she bore on with greater purpose, only turning her head now and then to see that the children were not too far behind. The man kept this distance in front of the woman purposely, though perhaps unconsciously, for he wanted to go on with his thoughts.

‘Fifteen years ago I came here with Lily,’ he thought. ‘We sat somewhere over there by a lake, and I begged her to marry me all through the hot afternoon. How the dragon-fly kept circling round us: how clearly I see the dragon-fly and her shoe with the square silver buckle at the toe. All the time I spoke I saw her shoe and when it moved impatiently I knew without looking up what she was going to say: the whole of her seemed to be in her shoe. And my love, my desire, were in the dragon-fly; for some reason I thought that if it settled there, on that leaf, the broad one with the red flower in the middle of it, if the dragon-fly settled on the leaf she would say “Yes” at once. But the dragon-fly went round and round: it never settled anywhere – of course not, happily not, or I shouldn’t be walking here with Eleanor and the children – Tell me, Eleanor, d’you ever think of the past?’

‘Why do you ask, Simon?’

‘Because I’ve been thinking of the past. I’ve been thinking of Lily, the woman I might have married ... Well, why are you silent? Do you mind my thinking of the past?’

‘Why should I mind, Simon? Doesn’t one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren’t they one’s past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees ... one’s happiness, one’s reality?’

‘For me, a square silver shoe-buckle and a dragon-fly –’

‘For me, a kiss. Imagine six little girls sitting before their easels twenty years ago, down by the side of a lake, painting the water-lilies, the first red water-lilies I’d ever seen. And suddenly a kiss, there on the back of my neck. And my hand shook all the afternoon so that I couldn’t paint. I took out my watch and marked the hour when I would allow myself to think of the kiss for five minutes only – it was so precious – the kiss of an old grey-haired woman with a wart on her nose, the mother of all my kisses all my life. Come Caroline, come Hubert.’

They walked on past the flower-bed, now walking four abreast, and soon diminished in size among the trees and looked half transparent as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches.

(Dick, 1985, pp.90–91)