

THE ROMANTICS

'Never apologise, never explain': a mantra my mother shared with me frequently, and herself embraced as fiercely as any of her lovers whenever another of her liaisons came to light. Describing herself as 'a strong woman', she was, she said, unfettered by petty censure and the expectations of others.

My father's forbearance appeared limitless, but 'a strong man' he was not. The term itself invites ridicule. I picture a fairground performer, attired in leopard-skin tights, sightless eyes, rictus grin, swinging rubber dumbbells above his head.

Why, you might ask, did my mother marry him? Were there boundaries that still needed to be stretched? Freedoms that still needed to be tested? Was my father's love a provocation? Was his patience a challenge?

He never asked for apologies or explanations. There would, he knew, be none. She was the woman he adored. This was the price he paid.

His solace was poetry. Whatever the season, whatever the weather, he would take his pale, age-stained edition of *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* into the garden. Sitting under the protecting arms of the wych-elm, wearing a light cotton jacket in summer, a heavy gaberdine in winter, he would read Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, losing and finding himself in the mists, clouds and clearings of their alchemical words.

Summer and winter, summer and winter. Did his poets start to tire him? Did their high sentiments fail to uplift him? Turning the pages, did the familiar verses begin to weary him? Did they weigh him down?

My father was found hanging from a low branch of the wych-elm. Palgrave, released from his grasp, lay open beneath his feet. Taking it up, I searched its pages for a note or letter, a slip of paper perhaps, something to mark his place. I discovered nothing. No explanation. No apology.