

## Unseen extract 6: *The Rotters' Club*

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*The Rotters' Club* by Jonathan Coe was published in 2001. It tells the story of a group of teenage friends and their coming of age in the 1970s, which includes coping with their parents' failing marriages. In this extract, Doug's father Bill and his lover Miriam are planning to spend an illicit night together.

### Sample question

Examine the view that Coe presents men and women as having different attitudes to infidelity in this extract.

Make close reference to the writer's methods in your response.

### Extract

That evening, he met Miriam at The Black Horse in Northfield, and they drove out to Stourbridge in his brown Marina. They checked into The Talbot Hotel as Mr and Mrs Stokes (a little tribute Bill had decided to pay to the current chairman of British Leyland). Irene was under the impression that he was in Northampton, staying overnight for a TGWU dinner. And indeed, that's where he should have been. But he had phoned the regional office that afternoon, and called off sick. It had all been arranged more than a month ago. It was to be their first whole night together.

They sat in the hotel's cavernous lounge bar, Bill drinking pints of Brew, Miriam drinking Dubonnet and bitter lemon. He rested his hand on her knee beneath the table. It was proving surprisingly hard to sustain a conversation.

'Wouldn't it be lovely,' Miriam said, 'if we could spend every evening together like this?'

Bill wasn't sure that it would be lovely at all. It was beginning to dawn on him that he and Miriam didn't know each other very well. Yes, they knew each other's bodies – knew every inch of each other's bodies, knew them inside out – but they had never done much talking; had never had the time. The affair had been going on for eleven months but tonight, quite unexpectedly, Bill felt that he was sitting with a stranger. He thought about Irene and found himself aching for her company: not for anything in particular she might say or do; just for her wordless, kindly presence. He thought about his son, about how he would feel if he could see his father in this ridiculous situation. And then he watched Miriam as she went to the bar for more drinks, and his body was galvanized, yet again, with the knowledge that he had somehow won the affection of this beautiful woman – this beautiful young woman, more to the point – and that tonight she

was going to give herself to him, willingly. To him: not to any of the young designers she worked for, or the fitters who were always trying to chat her up in the social club, but to him, Bill Anderton, pushing forty, losing his hair. Other girls had fallen for him in the past, often enough, so clearly there was something about him, something they must have liked: but the thrill never quite went away, the thrill of knowing that he could still inspire those feelings, even with Miriam, even after eleven whole months...

If only she would stop looking at him that way.

'Cheers,' he said, raising his glass.

'To us,' she said, raising hers.

They smiled at each other, and drank, and then just a few seconds later she put her glass down and let out a convulsive sob and said: 'I can't go on like this, Bill, I just can't.'

Soon afterwards she composed herself and they went in to dinner.

The dining room was vast, and empty. A waitress led them through the gloom to a far corner, lighting their way with a candle which she carried before her as if it were a torch, and which was then set down to flicker bravely on their table, partly no doubt as a romantic gesture but also, perhaps, in a futile attempt to ward off the swathes of funereal darkness that surrounded them. Buried somewhere in the walls was a speaker system through which John Denver's 'Annie's Song' dribbled out like primeval musical ooze. The base of the candlestick was encrusted with lumps of molten wax which Bill initially mistook for ice, so Arctic was the room temperature. They took it in turns to warm their hands at the flame of the candle, thereby finding a third use for it. Neither spoke much as they perused their menus, which were printed on enormous sheets of card, some two feet by eighteen inches, but seemed to offer only three choices, one of which was off.

Bill went for the mixed grill. Miriam chose the chicken-in-a-basket.

'Do you want chips with that?' the waitress asked.

'What's the alternative?' asked Miriam.

'Just chips,' said the waitress.

'Chips is fine,' said Miriam, fighting back tears.

'I'm sorry about that,' said the waitress, concerned. 'Do you not like chips?'

'It's all right,' said Miriam, reaching for a tissue, 'Really.'

'She loves chips,' said Bill. 'Adores them, in fact. We both do. This is a purely personal matter. Please go away.' Just as she was about to disappear into the encroaching shadows, he added: 'And bring us a bottle of Blue Nun while you're at it.'

He took his own handkerchief and dabbed tenderly beneath Miriam's eyes. She pushed him away.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm sorry. I'm being stupid.'

'Don't worry. It's this place. I know how you feel. It's so depressing.'

'It's not that,' said Miriam, sniffing. 'It's Irene. I want you to leave her. I want you to leave her and move in with me.'

'Oh, Jesus Christ,' said Bill. 'I don't believe this is happening.'

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