

CODE: 065800

# THE PROMISE OF HAPPINESS

BY JUSTIN CARTWRIGHT

I am the family face;  
Flesh perishes, I live on,  
Projecting trait and trace  
Through times anon  
And leaping from place to place  
Over oblivion.

Thomas Hardy

When has happiness ever been the  
subject of fiction?

John Updike

## **Prologue**

A man of sixty-eight is standing on a Cornish beach, peeing on small molluscs.

A woman of sixty-four is trying to fillet a mackerel in a low, dark, kitchen in a lime-washed and slate-roofed house.

A girl of twenty-three is standing on the set of a commercial in a studio in Shepperton, near London.

A man of twenty-eight is hiring a car from Alamo Rentals, in Buffalo-Niagara, New York State.

A woman of thirty-two is sitting on her bed, her things packed, in the Federal Correctional Facility, Loon Lake, New York State.

These are all the Judds, previously of London, N1, now scattered, but, like leaves caught in a vortex of wind, about to be gathered up.

## Chapter 1.

Charles Judd has walked on the beach almost every day for the last four years. When it is cold - it's early spring, but freezing - he needs to pee more often than is natural. Away from the house, where Daphne is heroically trying to cook something fishy from Rick Stein's cookbook, he often pees in the open. There's nobody around, and it reassures him that when he's out of the house he can pee freely. There's none of that gush of youth, of course, and he has to be careful of the wind direction, but still he feels calmed. When he was a young man, peeing imperiously into the urinals at Fox and Jewell, he used to direct a strong stream at the cigarette butts or the blue cakes of deodorant that lay on little rubber mats. This deodorant had an unnatural glitter, and released an unnatural smell of pine. Why do deodorants smell worse than the odours they are disguising? Minicab drivers in London always make their cars stink of resin, issuing from little Christmas tree things swinging from the rear-view mirror. When he used to send the company car to be washed, he told the fleet manager, Arnie Prince, to ask them not to wipe it down or spray it with Fruits of the Forest or Bavarian Conifer or whatever it was. But it always came back stinking: *What canyer do, Mr Judd, they're Nigerians. I'll try sending a runner wif a cleft stick next time.* Arnie Prince was a card.

At this time of year at the beach the scents are deeply marine. The air itself is loaded with fishiness and iodine and dislocated mussels. He sees a fishing boat coming in over Doom Bar, trailed by freeloading seagulls. The sight still stirs him: that the basics of fishing haven't changed; that the fish lie in the boxes lustrous and dying; that the fishermen throw nets over the side. But he knows that the sight of the dumpy little boats coming up the Camel Estuary doesn't stir him quite as deeply as it used to when they first came down here. He tries to imagine the last breath he will take and the last view he will take in. (Although you don't "take in " views in the way he had once imagined: science

has shown that the brain assembles the images according to its own plan and that you have no control.)

No, his last view is not going to be of the *Maid of Padstow* or the *Cornish Princess* butting up the estuary. He is trying to avoid these thoughts which suggest the death of hope. He remembers with a pang the last uninhibited fuck he had with a young woman - she was a trainee at Fox and Jewell - and for a few weeks they had fucked blithely in the office after hours. He was so happy, and so was she:

“You love this, don’t you?” he said.

“Yes, with you.” “Come on, you love it anyway.”

“It’s true, I love fucking,” she said, “but I’ve got a steady boyfriend, you know.”

He knew. That was twenty-three years ago. He walks up the path through the dunes across the tenth hole of the golf course, towards the church which had once been buried in sand. A squall is coming in off the estuary and he shelters under the lych gate. The church still has a half-excavated look, as though they had dug it out of the advancing sand dunes only sufficiently to let the congregation in the door and some light in the windows. He goes to church occasionally, because Daphne is on the flower roster and helps with fund-raising. He once took charge of a donkey at the church fête. The donkey took off at a fast, determined scuttle and he had run along beside it holding on to a screaming child. When the donkey tried to duck under a barrier he had pulled the child off just in time. Daphne was horrified: *God you’re useless. You’re embarrassing. All you were asked to do was lead a donkey and you turn it into a Wild West drama.* It was true that he had tried to liven things up by making the donkey trot, but the bony, dusty, fundamentalist, biblical creature took umbrage. (People don’t use phrases like “take umbrage” any more.) The child’s parents had taken umbrage too: *You fucking near killed her you wanker,* said a short, pot-bellied man in a West Country accent. No good protesting, because it was true that anything could have happened if he

hadn't just managed to snatch the child off donkey's back before it ducked under the barrier. Donkeys are intractable, highly unsuitable for children. Jesus rode a donkey. Appropriate transport for a humble man. And maybe Jesus didn't try to make it trot. Last Spring they were going to Jerusalem on a Holy Land tour with Cox and Kings, but the situation in Israel had deteriorated. They got the deposit back. Perhaps they would go when things calmed down.

As he stands under the lych gate he sees the little boat battling its way towards Bray Hill, following the channel which at low tide is nothing more than the river bed, a dark thread in the water, a bit like the thread they take out of the lobsters from the fish market. In the beginning they used to congratulate themselves: *look, we're eating lobster once or twice a week*. Some foods seem to confer status on the consumers, the way salmon did before it was farmed. Now salmon is cheap, slimy, and strangely mutant. And now they only have lobster when visitors come.

The rain is moving on; it goes in curtains, drawn along the estuary. There is a connection between all this water - the estuary, the scudding rain, the boat sending up a small frothy bow-wave - and his bladder. There's no-one about. As he pees he reads the gravestone:

*John Betjeman*

*1906-1984*

He doesn't like the fancy curlicued, arty, script of the headstone. It seems to him to contain volumes of smugness; of taste; of self-congratulation. He walks across the thirteenth fairway, minutely faceted by the rain. You have to hit a pretty good shot to get up in two. Although he was flattered to be given membership so quickly - *fast track* - he has been staying away from the clubhouse itself since Ju-Ju was arrested.

Their house, Curlew's End - "Which end?" said Clem - stands between the golf course and a lane that leads down to the the bay. It is double storied, white pebble-dashed and slate-roofed, built in nineteen twenty-eight for holiday makers. The garden is half rabbit pasture, which he mows sitting on a Hayter 13/40 tractor mower. He never told Daphne that it cost nearly two thousand pounds not including the optional disk which prevents crankshaft buckling. He has become quite adept at zipping around the meadow, the two-stroke Stratton engine hammering away, until he stops to empty the rear grass collector. Over by the hydrangeas, the only flowers that truly love life by the sea - he has a compost heap. It is protected by a dry stone wall and some yew trees, which lean away from the wind. They don't bend at all and yet they appear to be fastidious, trying to distance themselves from something unpleasant. In this way they are very English, he thinks. But then so am I, and increasingly ridiculous. The compost is used in the more sheltered part of the garden behind the house, where they have a proper lawn and some flowers, presided over - patronised even - by more hydrangeas. Here he tries to enrich the sandy thyme-bound soil. As he mows in summer he inhales the scents of grass and thyme voluptuously. The Hayter has six settings and cuts this lawn - the proper lawn, very close. But he has lost his early enthusiasm for jumping onto the driving seat and he has allowed the first rule of lawn-mowing, *little but often*, to lapse. The rabbits help by nibbling assiduously. At first he had tried to control them, but they live in a bramble jungle between Curlew's End and the golf course, so thick and impenetrable that he began to see them as the Viet Cong of this little set-up. He concentrates now on keeping them away from the flowers and the shrubs, using netting that makes the garden look like a small concentration camp. The mower is in the garage for the winter.

I must get another dog. The last one - a dachshund - fell over a cliff in full cry.

Now he can see the light in the kitchen and the outline of Daphne moving about. He pauses to watch her and in that instant he sees not only her but

himself yoked in ghostly outline to her. By what paths have we arrived here, beside the sea? As she pauses to catch Rick Stein's drift, her head bowed for a moment, her self - her thickening body which is beginning, like the yew trees, to take on a defensive posture - is stalled for a moment. He can't see her face - she is silhouetted - but he knows that she will be frowning fiercely at the page. She hates cooking, but she resolved to master it when they moved here. She felt that she should make a pact with seafood - crabs, lobsters, sea bass, mussels et cetera. It would indicate her commitment to the new life on the sea shore, to an active retirement. He has never used the word "retirement". To her this cooking could be evidence of a new closeness between them. Maybe she thinks they are living off the land in some way, he a hunter-gatherer, she tending the flame. To him, retirement sounds like an epitaph: retired, withdrawn from life, in preparation for the long sleep to come, the retreat back into the mineral world, under a few feet of thyme-infused turf, like Betjeman. Like Betj.

As he looks at Daphne, now chopping something, he sees for a moment Ju-Ju. It is unfair on Daphne that Ju-Ju is taller and more graceful, but still there's something in the quick positive movement of Daphne's head that reminds him painfully of Ju-Ju. Once Daphne said to him, "She's the love of your life." And he said, "It's just fathers and daughters", dismissively. But it was true that he loved Ju-Ju, and it was a physical passion. Sometimes when he was lonely he longed to sleep next to her as he had done when when she was a child, although he had never allowed himself to think of her having sex with anyone, least of all himself.

Coming down here, leaving London, was a mistake. And yet whenever he goes to London now he sees something repulsive: on the Tube with Charlie, he saw opposite them a boy and a girl, with studs in their lips and tongues and ears, kissing. The girl - probably a drug addict - looked about twelve; she was wearing mittens of rainbow colours and her pale, paper-thin skin was sooted around the eyes. (He can remember chimney sweeps and the smell of soot.)

As these children kissed, smiling narcotically, he thought of those magnets he had had at school, which produced a sort of metallic skating between sheets of paper, or made a haystack out of paperclips. Their tongues might become stuck together. Charlie, ever sensitive, said, "It's nothing Dad, it's nothing," when he had sighed, probably loudly. What did he mean? And this is something he has realised about families, that they have idealised expectations of each other. On the one hand more allowances are made, but also more is demanded. There seems to me a sort of Koranic law inside the family, no matter what chaos and madness and laxity rules outside the house. Charlie was really trying to say "Lighten up Dad, you don't want to look like a cunt." Other members of the family want you to look good, because they share your flesh and blood. And it is true that we all have unrealistic expectations of our family: for example, he often wanted Daphne to be wittier and taller and more graceful because that was what he aspired to himself. At Fox and Jewell he had always been seen as urbane, with a light touch. The clients liked him.

Now Daphne catches sight of him and waves. He opens the gate, the one that leads from the Viet Cong maquis and the golf course, and crosses the lawn. Even after rain it is firm. In London the lawn was sodden and heavy. Their house looked over a patch of lawn at a Victorian church that was always weeping, like those saints in Ireland, mineral salts and dead rainwater. At the back door, which has its own lean-to atrium for tools and coats and sticks - where the deceased dog's lead still hangs - he removes his coat. It's a National Trust Fleece, unobtrusively decorated with an acorn motif. He shakes the coat once, and then changes into his indoor shoes.

"You've still got that hat on."

"Oh yes. What are you cooking?"

"Rick Stein's mackerel with gooseberry sauce."

"Sounds good."

"I'm struggling."

Four mackerel corpses lie on a board. Neither of them likes mackerel - oily, dark, fish with tough raincoat skin - but Daphne feels obliged to buy them once in a while because they are plentiful, cheap and, so all the cookbooks say, nutritious, full of live-giving oils and omega fats. Perhaps she is just worrying about his brain cells.

“You have to remove the backbone and then sort of dust them with flour before lightly pan-frying them.”

“Do you want me to help?”

“Please. It says how to fillet them on page twenty-one, but..”

He looks at the recipe. The picture shows the fish lying neatly on a plate, crisp, decorated with a small, casually composed salad of rocket, with a glistening mount of gooseberry sauce and a generous - not too refined - lemon wedge next to it.

“I couldn’t get gooseberries but luckily we have a jar of lingonberries that we got in Sweden.”

“That was six years ago.”

“Do you think they will have gone off?”

“Everything goes off.”

He sharpens the knives and cuts off the heads and tries to remove the backbone. The flesh of the mackerel is bloody. When he finally pulls the backbone free what’s left of the fish looks like a swab from an operating theatre.

Daphne has opened the lingonberry sauce.

“It’s a little cystallised around the top, but deep down it looks all right.”

“Fine. Let’s have diced mackerel chunks with crystallised lingonberries and while we are at it why don’t we see if we can find those Italian artichokes in oil which we have been keeping since nineteen seven-nine for a special occasion. We’ll just throw them casually around the plate, a la Rick ...”

Charles. Please don’t.”

He stares at her. His head is full, bulging from the inside against the walls.

“Daphne, do you mind if I bin these fishy remains?”

“You’re not cross, are you?”

“No, why should I be? Shall we forget about mackerel for ever? We don’t like them and they make the place stink.”

He slides the mackerel off the board and into the bin, and then he scrubs the board.

“Charlie rang. He’s in Buffalo.”

“Buffalo. Home of the Buffalo Bills.”

“He said that they are going to take a few days in New York to get her things sorted out.”

He takes his hat off, but as he does so he realises that it will be impregnated with fish oil, which, however healthful, will forever remain in the fibres of the tweed to remind him of the day they forsook mackerel and his daughter was let out of prison.

“How was your walk?”

“It was fine. Rained a bit, but I took shelter.”

Now they are standing in the kitchen, across the scrubbed table, a jar of encrusted lingonberry sauce separating them, but they both know there is a lot more, a sort of barely controllable turbulence.

“What shall we eat?”

“I could go to the fish and chips on my way back.”

“All right.”

“Chips?”

“Small portion.”

“Okay. I’m off.”

“Take your time. I’m on flowers.”

He puts his scented hat back on and goes out into the vestibule. She can hear him fiddling about, looking for the keys, tying his shoes, sighing, before the door opens. For a moment she can hear seagulls. It’s like one of those radio shows they used to listen to as children, with comic sound effects when

the doors opened. She was once told that they used coconut shells for the horses' hooves. The clip clop, clip clop, was in fact just half coconuts banged down on a paving slab at the BBC.

The mackerel are in the pedal bin and liable, as Charles said, to stink the place up, so she ties up the plastic bag and takes it outside to the real bin. Then she goes out of the front, down the lane - in summer a mass of cars wrestling politely - heading for the bay, and down towards the path to the church. She never goes out the back way through the brambles and across the golf course on her own. Charles will be on his way to the pub at Chapel Amble. For two years now he hasn't gone to a pub around here. He can't bear the thought that everyone knows Ju-Ju is in jail. It's killing him. She went to the medium security prison at Otisville twice and Loon Lake once: Charles didn't go at all. He won't discuss it, beyond saying, "I can't do it." It's killing him. His walks have become longer. He's liable to go out at any time. She's suggested another dog, perhaps something with more sense, like a Labrador. He's always been a person who kept a lot back. In thirty-six years of marriage she's never felt she knew him through and through. When Ju-Ju turned twenty-one she told her about the letter he had written her. He had never mentioned it. She begged Ju-Ju to show it to her: it was a wonderful letter, fifteen pages long, unmistakably a love letter. "Fathers and daughters," said Ju-Ju by way of explanation, and she saw that they shared a Masonic code. But that doesn't explain his relative indifference to Sophie.

The lane closes in just before the turnoff to St Enodoc. It's wet and dark. Marriage is a strange thing. She takes comfort in this phrase, which many people use. Coming here has brought them closer, whatever Charles thinks. He believes that in some ways marriage has diminished him. As she crosses the fairway, she sees that the church, up above to the left, has a light on. She came to love the place when the children were small and they first came here on holiday. She went with the children to Betjeman readings and moth hunts on Bray Hill. She once tried to explain to Charles: I feel I belong here. Balls, he

said. But he loved it too. He loved the coast path and the estuary. He used to swim, until one day Charlie had had to save him. He had suddenly panicked. It was a year after the take-over of Fox and Jewell, and six months after he was manoeuvred off the management committee. When Charlie came down the two of them would swim out and round the buoy with a bell on it. They had left it late that day and the tide was turning. Afterwards Charles had gone to bed for a few hours, shocked and cold, and humiliated that a skinny boy - Charlie was only eighteen then - had held his arm and calmed him down.

The financial pages had described the take-over as a merger, but really Brown, Kaplan and Desoto had simply gobbled up Fox and Jewell. Charles had to share a secretary and the partners' dining room, panelled with dull portraits, was used strictly for new business. He had been fond of his secretaries. Although they had never discussed it, she knew that he had nearly drowned because of the new management committee.

John Betjeman's association with the place has left a kind of patina, not visible to all. But it coats the village and the lane with a warmth and order. Some of the bigger houses, more sheltered than theirs, have a look that - she thinks - only comes with centuries of what her mother called breeding. Although she tries hard, she knows that she doesn't quite have the ability *to make a house a home*. Her mother often used that phrase and it irritated her, but now she is using it, albeit mutely. They lived in a succession of Army houses so that there was always the sense that it was pointless to put down roots, another of her mother's excuses. Now she is trying to put down roots, but her children are scattered and her husband is distracted. At first he tackled the garden and practised his golf enthusiastically while she was taking cooking lessons at Rick Stein's in Padstow. She enjoyed taking the ferry over every morning, but she wasn't any good at the cooking. The mackerel dish she tried to prepare looked pretty simple. There is something deeply alien about fish, whatever the cookbooks and pundits say. And the uglier, bonier and more unpleasant their habits, the more we are supposed to like them.

As she walks towards the church, up the path which also leads to the tenth tee, the light is going. Out on the estuary the sea is smudged, as though the silver polish has just been applied and it is waiting for a final rub with soft cloth. Which it won't be getting. There is still some light in the sky, low over towards the railway bridge, and it is this which makes the light from inside the windows of the church so pale. There's also a stained glass window, which from here is opaque. She likes this puritan plainness. She goes through the lych gate, down the gravelled path, and to the porch where the flowers stand in a plastic bucket. At this time of year they have to phone Bodmin and they are delivered. You take what you can get. She brings them in.

The church is cold but it will be warmed up for Sunday service. She unlocks the vestry and finds the vases and the hedgehog things that hold the flowers. She is quite good at flowers. In spring and summer they have great armfuls of cornflowers and, daffodils, lilies and roses from peoples' gardens. When she was asked by Frances to come in on the flower rota she rushed back to Islington to Paula Pryke for advice: simple but abundant is her credo now, more demanding on her than the Nicene Creed. With these flowers - some greenhouse carnations, some long-stemmed red roses, and some South African foliage - it is going to be difficult to be lavish. The foliage is coppery and leathery to the touch. But it gives off an exotic scent all of its own as she snips and chops. She likes a small arrangement for the altar and something more generous in front of the pulpit, to suggest that this parish appreciates the visits of the vicar. Charles - predictably - can't stand him. He says that the vicar's little sermons are banal if not actually meaningless. But Charles also understands that it is important to keep up something ancient as a sort of talisman against what is happening in the world. Sometimes if the wind is strong they feel as if they have gone to sea in the good ship Enodoc.

The vicar asked her if she wanted him to say a word about Ju-Ju's release on Sunday, and she said, *better not Charles hasn't quite come to terms with it. Will you ask him? All right, but I know he won't agree.*

The vicar believes in witness, but Charles doesn't. She hasn't asked him. Also, she thinks that maybe it's quite exciting, quite contemporary, for the vicar to be able to pass on the church's blessing to a sinner. You don't get many clear-cut sins down here.

As she gathers up the flower stalks and puts them in a plastic supermarket bag and carries her flower arrangement out over the cold flagstones to the altar, and as she fiddles with it a little while, she tries to contain her deep unease. For more than two years it hasn't left her, day or night. Perhaps it would have been a good idea for them to stand, hand in hand, to pray for Ju-Ju - to bear witness to something, to anything. It is not as though Charles has an alternative, more worldly, plan. He is asphyxiating himself. He has his own hands around his throat. *He is in denial*, the vicar said. For a moment she smiles as she imagines trying to tell him that he is in denial. Charles thinks you lose some of your soul if you use phrases like that, or talk about a learning experience or healing or counselling. But the fact is they are both in need of all of these.

She places the second vase on the flagstones near the pulpit and it looks pretty good, the russet foliage studded with red roses. Sophie thinks her father is a stick-in-the-mud: *Like what's so important about the old way of saying things. Language is always changing. You should chill, Dad.* As she tweaks the aromatic foliage - symmetrical but not static is the effect she is after - she thinks that if Charles's fingers are pried from the wreckage he might sink.

She looks at her watch. Charlie has promised to ring as soon as he has Ju-Ju safely in his hire car. She puts the unused bits of twine and florists' wire and secateurs away and locks the vestry.

"Anyone there? Daphne?"

"Just locking up."

"Oh those are beautiful, Daphne."

"Thank you."

Frances Cooper is wearing a broad-brimmed Australian rain hat and a long Barbour raincoat.

“Raining again.”

Daphne has been thinking of praying for a moment, but for Frances the church has very little to do with God; it’s more a shrine to Englishness: flowers, history, familiar - if meaningless - hymns, your own kneeler and a sort of bracing draughtiness, long out of favour.

“Daphne, how’s Charles?”

“He’s fine. Or was when I last saw him half an hour ago. Why?”

“No. I saw him earlier. I just wondered.”

“He’s very concerned. Obviously. It’s not rocket science to work that out. But with Juliet coming home soon (she can’t quite bring herself to say “released” ) he’s trying to cope.”

“I can’t imagine what it’s like.”

“It’s been hard for us. Ju-Ju, Juliet was really dumped in it. She’s had to carry the can for others. That’s the bit that Charles can’t bear.”

Daphne knows that this is not strictly true, but over the past two years she has almost convinced herself that Richie was solely to blame.

“I wanted to ask you all over, and a few friends, to dinner, when the time is right. Do you think Charles will agree? And Juliet?”

“It’s so kind of you. Charles may not like the idea immediately, but let’s give it a week or two after Ju-Ju gets here. Frances, I’m really touched.”

They embrace in front of the altar, in front of her little of arrangement of pinks in the Waterford crystal vase. Frances squeezes her firmly against her waxed coat. She’s a solid woman. They are both quite solid, filled with middle-aged substances of mysterious origin.

“Shall we walk back together?”

“I just wanted to say a prayer.”

“Oh righty-oh. I’ll be off. We’re going to an avant-garde play in Exeter that Pip has produced with her group. I’ve got to get into something less rustic. Obviously. Will you lock?”

Frances sets off, carrying away the postcard takings, which rely heavily on the proximity of John Betjeman’s remains and the charming story of the sand dunes which once engulfed the place. In order to keep the church sanctified, the vicar had to climb down through a hole in the roof once a month. So the story goes.

Daphne sinks carefully to her knees, no resting her bottom on the edge of the pew, and prays. She doesn’t believe anyone is listening, of course, but she thinks that God encompasses everything that we are and that includes the hand-stitched kneelers and the wind and the squalls on the sea which are also peppering the windows and Ju-Ju waiting in her cell. Her prayers are like the stitches in the kneelers, contributing in a small way to a bigger design. She doesn’t pray for anything specific. That would be presumptuous. Instead she recites the Lord’s Prayer almost silently: *Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever amen.* She whispers the words *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us* more boldly. She is thinking of Ju-Ju, but also of Charles. She kneels for perhaps another minute so that her seriousness and silence will allow the prayer to percolate outwards. She rises from the floor. She has to move one knee and push hard with her arms to get herself upright.

Charles once said to her, we’ve come to live in a bloody pantomime: the bearded vicar, the fat woman (Frances) with the lesbian daughter (Pip), the fishermen who hate our guts, Rick Stein dreaming up more silly ways to fry fish, the ghost of Betjeman stalking about in plus fours, the lethal donkey derby, the

obese children on the beach, the ruckus about the lady captain's parking spot. It was funny, but he wasn't laughing.

She turns off the lights, closes the heavy doors of the church, locks them and walks down to the fairway. What Charles seems to have forgotten is that he said the same sort of thing about their life in London: the management committee with its idiot proclamations; the traffic full of murderous yobboes in vans, the dog-poo in the streets, the mad people on the Underground. And schools. Thank God that period of their lives is over: schools and tests and places at universities, the middle-class English steeplechase, which so enraged Charles. He wrote countless letters and demanded frequent meetings with teachers. Only Ju-Ju took it all in her stride, never a stumble from St Paul's to Oxford to the Courtauld.