

CAUTIONARY TALES



First love: Marion aged 16

At 16, novelist MARION MCGILVARY ran away with a married man. Here she vividly re-lives the story she tells her daughters when they think THEY'VE made a mess of their love lives

We took day trips to the seaside, and went home together at the end of the evening — always to my friend's grandmother's house, because she slept like the dead and believed us when we turned back the clock to make it look as though we had come in before dawn.

Every morning, the milkman's arrival was a signal that it was time for me to leave the backseat of Mike's car and go to bed.

John and Mike both said they lived with their parents, so it never occurred to me that we might go to their houses, especially as Anne's grandmother was so lenient.

I was madly in love and, eventually, nervously after several months I decided it was time for him to meet my parents. I asked them if John could come for the weekend. Reluctantly, they agreed. Arrangements were made, and he was to arrive by bus the next Friday evening at 7.30pm.

I was beside myself with excitement. I would no longer be the loser who couldn't get a boyfriend. This would be the seal of public approval.

In an unaccustomed burst of intimacy, my mother and I made up his bed in the guest room. I was just straightening the bedspread when the telephone rang. My mother went into the hall to answer it.

She picked up the receiver and spoke with her usual, overly formal

telephone voice. 'Yes,' she said. 'No,' she said. 'I see,' she said, and then tersely she thanked the person for calling and hung up.

Two seconds later she was standing before me, her face thunderous. 'I expect you know what that was about,' she said accusingly.

I didn't, but it clearly wasn't good. I was terrified as I shook my head. 'Are you sure?' she glared.

'Yes,' I tropped nervously. 'You'd better sit down,' she ordered, and pushed me onto the bed I had just spent 15 minutes smoothing into hotel-like perfection. 'That was your boyfriend's mother,' she said. 'She was wondering if I knew that my daughter was a home-wrecker, that she was carrying on with a married man who already had a wife and a baby at home whom he was abandoning to come here for the weekend.'

I gaped like a fairground goldfish

just before it floats to the top of the plastic bag it's been frantically swimming around in.

'You knew he was married, didn't you?' she said, angrily.

But I hadn't. I didn't have a clue. I was devastated. My great love disintegrated into tawdry foolishness, and, crushed with humiliation I heard myself agreeing to tell him to go away and never come back.

I was dispatched to meet him at the bus stop where, without making eye contact, I did as I was told, then turned around and walked away feeling like my world had ended. My mother behaved as though I had infected her with syphilis. Even though I hadn't known he was married and had been lied to for months, in her eyes I should be ashamed of myself.

So I was. But I was also hurt and lonely. My confidence in my parents, after their coldness, and John,

for his deception, was shattered, but he at least was apologetic and seemed to be only person I could turn to.

Secretly, we met again, using Anne and Mike as a go-between and he told me he and his wife had split up long before we'd met. It wasn't my fault, he assured me.

I still don't know if that was true or not, or even if he was — as he claimed — only 19, but at the time I was so anxious to be comforted, to have my own happy ending that I chose to believe him.

However, I knew my parents would never agree to us seeing each other, so we would have to make a new start elsewhere. When I left school, I arranged to go and live with my aunt in Oxford — where I'd long talked about living and working since I often spent holidays there — but unbeknown to my family John came with me,

taking a room in a hostel until we both found jobs and could find a way to be together.

A week or so after my arrival, I confessed to my aunt that John had come with me and the baggage I had brought was considerably larger than could be contained in my grandfather's cabin trunk.

My aunt was deeply disapproving. Finally, I realised there was no running away from it — instead of leaving my shame behind I merely carried it with me.

Our great romance lasted less than three months. My aunt was furious with me. The hostel John was living in was sordid. He hated the only job he had managed to find as a casual labourer, and couldn't make ends meet on his salary.

He also really missed his son, who was just a toddler, and so I encouraged him to go back home — supposedly just for a visit, but I knew it was for good.

I couldn't stop thinking about his wife and child. I was crippled with a guilt that he didn't seem to share. He had responsibilities, but it felt as if it was me who had to face up to them.

He wrote to me after he had left, saying how much he loved and missed me — something, I've always thought regretfully, that no one has ever done since. The same pale blue envelopes with the same violet embossed stamps landed on my aunt's doormat every few days.

I opened them eagerly, read them wistfully and saved them reverently, while my aunt treated them as though they contained anthrax. Finally, I just couldn't fight her any more and, swayed by her annoyance, I stopped answering.

STILL the letters came, week after week after week, until in desperation I put them all in a jiffy bag and sent them back. In the face of so much disapproval, I just didn't know what else to do.

I thought we were Romeo and Juliet, but we were just two idiotic teenagers making a mess of our lives. I felt terrible for years afterwards but now, as the mother of a schoolgirl only a little older than I was then, I have some sympathy with my stupid younger self.

I want to reach back through the years and give myself a hug, which might have made me less eager to rush back into the arms of the man who had consistently lied to me.

I'm struck now by how little understanding or faith my mother had in me. If my daughter was dating a man who turned out to be married, I would be angry with him, not her. I would want to protect her, not berate her.

I stayed on in Oxford, where I got a job in the university library, dated normal boys with no hidden wives and met my first husband a few years later — marrying too soon, as though I could somehow wipe out the tainted feeling.

Eventually, my marriage broke up, and I wrote a novel in which the heroine sends her childhood sweetheart's letters back in a jiffy bag.

My first romance with John was just my sordid secret, a cautionary tale I told during my daughters' adolescence when they were upset about their own failed romances.

As for John? I hope he went back to his wife, raised his child and had a happy life. But I don't know, and I doubt I'll ever find out. I never heard from him again.

Dare you try... SUPER HOT ROCKET

IT'S time to turn over a new leaf. Bin your iceberg lettuces and try something with a bit more bite.

Dr Steve Rothwell is a pioneer in the world of salad leaves. His doctorate is in no less than, wait for it... the Applied Nutritional & Environmental Physiology of Watercress. Yes really. And while watercress is a particular passion, this professional leaf-lover has

finally branched out. His new product, a fiery derivation of rocket, is called Super Hot Rocket (£1 for 30g, steveleaves.co.uk). These spicy leaves have been compared to pepper or Japanese spice wasabi — and the potent flavour (and heat) develops as you chew them. The perfect way to jazz up a boring salad.

CHRIS BEANLAND