

An Age of Understanding

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Chapter 1 Brooding Clouds

It was the perfect day for a funeral. Dark foreboding clouds hung menacingly across the sky. It wasn't really cold, but it felt cold. Unusually so really, for the south of Spain, especially considering that it was only actually the beginning of autumn. The bleak, dismal sky reflected the dark mood of the congregated people. The rolling clouds were murky and ominous, full of impending menace. It seemed like even the Gods were sad at Matt's passing. Constance had cried all through the church service. It had been very hard on her, having to say goodbye to Matt. He had become very important to her, even though, in reality, they hadn't known each other for that long. The funeral service, while it had been mercifully short, had been heavily laden with emotion. The small church the service had been held in was very unpretentious. It was just a plain, old, but not historically old, church. Matt would have liked that. He had always been a very modest, unassuming person. Even though he had been a man of great intellect, and very world-wise, he had always been a very grounded person. A very unpretentious person. He had been the sort of person who could hold his own in a conversation with the best of intellectuals, and writers, but was equally at his ease talking with the cleaner at his block of flats. He had always taken an interest in those he met, always remembering the names of their children, or pets. He was without a doubt the nicest person that Constance had ever met. Their friendship had grown over the preceding months. A friendship that had brought much solace into Constance's troubled life. Had he sensed that she had been somewhat lost? Had he realised that she had needed someone to give her direction? Constance had warmed to him immediately, and in short order a strong bond had developed between them. Obviously she wasn't the only person who had felt that way about him. Many people, of all ages, and walks of life, had turned out to say their final farewells. It was a fitting assembly for such an engaging person. After the completion of the service, Matt's coffin was carried the short distance around to the back of the church to the cemetery. On one side there was the traditional Spanish style cemetery, with little chapels, where the coffins were placed into wall vaults. Matt's coffin, however, was carried off to the right, where there were some graves, not really many, that had been dug into the ground, with only their headstones visible. Everyone had formed a circle around the hole that had been prepared for Matt's coffin. It was unusual, thought Constance, normally in Spain people were buried in the walls of tombs, rather than in the ground. Probably Matt had preferred to be buried in the ways of his

country of origin.

‘Hello, you wouldn’t be Constance, would you?’

Constance, shaken from her reflections, turned to see two men by her side. The one who had addressed her was tall, bald, and had spoken with a New Zealand accent, obviously a native of Matt’s original homeland.

‘Yes I am, hello. Have you come over from New Zealand for Matt’s funeral?’

‘No, I’ve been living here for ages, like Matt. I’m Peter, and this is Connor.’

‘Hello there Constance. Matt has told us all about you, and your terrible gin drinking sessions.’

Constance laughed out loud, and then instantly felt incredibly guilty about having laughed at a funeral. Connor smiled at her.

‘That’s what I like to hear,’ continued Connor, ‘a bit of laughter. Matt would have loved that. He was never a one for the solemn occasions, you know?’

Connor spoke with a very strong Irish accent. He looked a bit younger than Peter, who, probably in his early 60’s, was roughly the same age as Matt had been. Connor was probably in his mid to late 50’s. He was shorter than Peter, stocky, with a full head of still very black hair. Constance looked back at the hole prepared for Matt’s coffin.

‘I was sort of expecting the tomb to be the usual Spanish sort, you know, one of those slots in a wall of vaults.’

Peter chuckled lightly.

‘Definitely not Matt’s style. He always said that he wanted to be buried in the ground. He wanted to feel the elements, to be a part of nature. He wanted to feel the hot sun beating down on him, be rained on, and have his tombstone grow old and faded with time. Me too, to be honest. The Spanish style is definitely not for me. No matter how long I have been living here.’

‘Well, you can just do whatever you like with my body,’ chipped in Connor. ‘When I’m gone it won’t be of any more concern to me. Burn me up, and throw me to the four winds. Do with me whatever you like, now. When you’re gone, you’re gone. I must say, Constance, you have a very lovely Aussie accent. With your mild accent, and your soft voice, you would make a fine reader of poetry.’

Constance warmed immediately to Matt’s friends. How nice that he had had such good people in his life. Although it wasn’t really that much of a surprise, a lovely person like him would have easily found the best of people to befriend. With his great kindness, and easy going nature, it was only natural that he would have found kindred spirits.

The light and easy banter between the two friends came to an abrupt stop, as they looked towards the grave. Constance turned just in time to see Matt’s coffin being slowly lowered into the ground. He was leaving them forever. He was entering his

last resting place. As the tears welled up in her eyes again, she glanced to her side and saw Peter and Connor with their arms around each other's shoulders. They gripped each other tightly. She could see the pain and sadness in their eyes. No amount of banter could hide the sorrow they felt at their friend's passing. When the coffin was at the bottom of the grave, people started to grab handfuls of dirt to lightly throw onto it. An elderly woman, weeping uncontrollably, made the sign of the cross, and dropped a bouquet of red roses onto the coffin. Constance wondered who she was, and what had been her relationship with Matt. Without a doubt, he had touched the lives of many people. You couldn't have known him without having loved him. He had just been that sort of person. Peter went to the graveside, and took a letter out of his pocket. He mumbled something quietly, and then dropped the letter onto Matt's coffin. Connor, following him, took a small book out of his pocket, and tossed it down, among the dirt and flowers accumulating on the coffin. Constance stepped forward, and took a handful of dirt which she let slip slowly through her fingers, lightly drifting down.

'Goodbye, my dearest friend. Thank you for everything. Knowing you has changed my life. I really don't know where I would be if I hadn't had the great fortune to meet you, to have you enter into my life.'

With tears streaming down her face she returned to where Peter and Connor stood. Both of them embraced her. She sobbed uncontrollably as they held her tight.

'Come on the pair of you. Let's go and get a drink.'

Connor's words came as a blessing. Constance had felt rooted to the spot, unable to move, not knowing where to go, or what to do, blocked by her grief. The three of them walked, in silence, out of the cemetery. Behind them lay Matt, physically lost to them forever, but firmly entrenched in their memories.

'Did you come by car Constance?' asked Peter.

'Yes, that's mine over there.'

She pointed to her small grey hatchback. Peter stopped beside a big green station wagon.

'This is us here. Follow us, we'll have a few drinks, and some lunch.'

Constance walked across to her car, and got in. In a sort of a daze she started her car, and followed the other two as they left the carpark, and drove even further out of the city. After just a short drive they turned into what looked like a slightly run down bar on the sea shore. She parked next to them, and got out.

'I know it doesn't look like much of a place,' said Connor, 'but the food is great, and there's an absolutely fantastic view. Come on, lass, let's get you inside.'

He put his arm around her shoulder, and guided her towards the entrance. In her sad state it was good to have someone giving her directions. A place to be. It was a day to be with someone, someone who had known Matt. It would have been terribly

hard on her to have returned, by herself, to her flat, alone with her memories. She followed them through the old fashioned, rather drab, and run down looking restaurant, to an outside patio. Out there it was like entering into another world. Constance was hit by a visual explosion. As promised the view was nothing short of spectacular. Breathtaking. Probably even more so with the dark, sinister clouds adding more than a touch of the dramatic. The dark sky seemed to grow out of the ocean waves, almost as one with each other. The normally tranquil waves of the Mediterranean Sea were wildly crashing onto an outcrop of rocks, jutting out from the beach, seemingly showing their anger on that most sullen of days. Peter guided her to a table, and pulled out a chair for her. No sooner had they sat down, when a middle aged woman came over to their table. She had a very sad expression on her face. She obviously knew what the day had brought.

‘I so terribly sorrow with Matthew.’

Her English wasn’t very good, and she had a very strong Spanish accent, but her sadness was obviously sincere, and heartfelt.

‘What I can bring you? You want usual?’

Connor held up his hand.

‘No, not today, Bianca. Today we are all drinking gin, and grapefruit soda. Matt’s favourite.’

The waitress nodded, lowered her head, and left the three of them. Connor turned his attention to Constance, on his face a cheeky grin.

‘I hear Matt turned you on to the good gin, is that right?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’ Constance smiled. ‘I’d never even tried gin before, now it’s my favourite. But I didn’t know you could drink it with grapefruit soda. That was a new one for me.’

Peter laughed.

‘Yeah, he got me hooked on it as well. He invented the grapefruit part, as far as I know. He always had to be different. That was just his style. He was never one to follow the mainstream. He got a lot of people hooked on that. Not Connor, though, he’s still a beer man. No matter how hard Matt tried. The last of the holdouts. The only one who refused to relent.’

Connor shook his head.

‘Not today Pete. Today is a gin day. We’ll drink to the good man’s health, with his favourite beverage, we will.’

Constance smiled at Connor, and then turned to Peter.

‘Peter, I imagine you knew Matt from New Zealand?’

‘Actually no. Both of our brothers were good friends. When Matt was about to head over to London, for work, his brother asked my brother if I would help him settle in. I was already living there by then. I had a pull out couch, so he crashed with

me for a while, and... well the rest is history.'

Peter looked to the sky, and smiled as he thought of those days.

'Actually we might have played rugby against each other when we were a lot younger. We went to rival schools, and even though he was a couple of years younger than me, we may well have come into contact on a rugby field somewhere. We both remember an occasion when that might have been, but both of us were sure that we had been on the winning team that day, so, hey, go figure.'

All three of them laughed. It felt so good to Constance to be able to laugh. It was time to let go of the sadness about Matt's death, and hold onto the memories of his life. She was in the right company for that.

At that moment Bianca reappeared with the most beautiful looking cocktails Constance had ever seen. They were in big wine glasses, full of ice, with a lower layer of reddish liquid, the upper part being more of a pink colour, and green slices of fruit topping it all off. Constance was absolutely astonished.

'My goodness, what of earth are these?'

Both Peter and Connor laughed.

'Sure, but he had them well trained here.' said Connor.

Peter went into a longer explanation.

'Over the years Matt developed the fine art of the gin. The bottom layer is of freshly squeezed Sicilian red grapefruit juice. Then the gin is poured in delicately across the top onto the back of a spoon lowered into the glass, so as to not mix completely with the bottom layer. That's what causes the different coloured layers, and then a couple of slices of lime are added. Give it a stir up with the straw, and it's ready to go. They look good don't they?'

'I've never seen anything like it.'

Constance stirred the drink, and took a sip.

'My goodness, this is fantastic. This is nothing like the gins I used to drink with him. He must have really felt like he was slumming it when he was drinking with me.'

Connor put down his drink, and leaned over the table towards Constance.

'Now don't you go thinking like that, young lass, Matt really enjoyed your chats. You were like a breath of fresh air for him. In any case, the only place they make them like this is out here, and that took a lot of coaxing on his part.'

'How long have you... did you know Matt, Connor?'

'I met the two of these disreputable Kiwis in a pub watching the rugby. Must be about eight years ago now. That was the ruin of me, it was.'

Peter slapped Connor on the back.

'Can you remember who was playing that day?'

He laughed out loud. Connor pretended to go into a deep thinking mode.

‘I think it was England versus Scotland, or maybe against Wales. The memory isn’t what it used to be, you know.’

The two of them roared with laughter.

‘What’s so funny?’ asked Constance, smiling at their contagious humour.

Connor just shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head. It was Peter who replied to her.

‘Actually it was New Zealand playing against Ireland. And we thrashed the buggers. Connor has never quite managed to forgive us for that.’

‘I’ve never liked the rugby, anyway.’ returned Connor.

The two of them laughed heartily. Constance was interested in finding out as much information about Matt and his friends as she could.

‘Peter, did you move over here at the same time as Matt? I know he had been here around ten years.’

‘Yeah, I did. We both wanted a change from the cold. The English weather wears you down after a while. The coldness just seeps into your bones. When summer finally does arrive, it sometimes lasts just a few weeks. After a while neither of us could take it any longer. Both of us wanted to stay in Europe though, so we decided to give it a go over here. By initially sharing a house it kept the costs down, until we could see if things were going to work out for us. Then when we were both pretty well established, we each got our own places. In the end it was the best move I ever made. I work in IT, so most of my work is over the internet. I can base myself wherever I like, really. To be honest, I’ve cut down a lot on how much work I do these days. I decided that I wanted to spend more time enjoying the years I have left. As we have seen... ‘

His voice trailed off, and a solemn mood descended on the three of them. Constance took advantage of the change in subject to fill in a few of the blanks she had about Matthew’s death.

‘I don’t want to be rude, but what exactly happened to Matt?’

Peter remained immobile, with his face looking out to sea. Connor replied to her.

‘It seems like his heart just gave out. No warning signs. Only 60 years old. He’d always kept in good shape, with the swimming, and walking, and stuff. Really unexpected, right out of the blue. To be honest though, if you have to go, that’s the way to do it. He died peacefully in his sleep. He just went to bed, and never woke up. His cleaning woman found him the next morning. He just looked like he was sleeping. He obviously didn’t suffer at all, thank the good Lord.’

‘Was that the woman who put roses on his coffin?’

‘Sorry, love, I’m not sure.’

Peter rejoined the conversation.

‘Yes, it was, Constance. That was her. She absolutely adored Matt. Like

everyone, really.’

Constance was a bit hesitant, but she knew that this would be her best moment for finding out all she could about her dear friend.

‘I don’t want to be nosy, but Matt never really spoke about what he did here. Was he on a retirement fund, or something?’

‘That was Matt, alright,’ replied Connor, ‘never one to blow his own trumpet. Let me tell you about Matt, now. He was a bit of an investment genius, he was. He invested a lot in the money markets, and occasionally in stocks, when he felt there was a sure fire winner. He gave me some good advice. In fact, he made me a lot of money over the years. My family cleaned up big time back in the 80’s building boom in Ireland. We sold the family farm, just 30 kilometres outside Dublin, for a fortune. They built one of those so-called dormitory towns on the land. New housing just a stone’s throw from the centre of Dublin. It was funny really, when we were kids growing up, playing out in those fields, we used to think that Dublin was a long way away. Next thing you know, we were virtually an outer suburb of the place. Anyway, I hadn’t really invested my share very well, and I was really just frittering it away until I met Matt. He got me back on track, and helped me invest it with good returns. And would he take a penny from me for it? He would barely let me shout a round in return. That was the person that Matt was. The salt of the earth. Bianca!’ he yelled, ‘for God’s sake keep these drinks coming!’

Peter placed a hand on Connor’s shoulder. He spoke quietly.

‘Hey, keep your head on, mate. Don’t yell at poor old Bianca. She’s feeling sad too, you know?’

Connor calmed down a bit.

‘Yeah, I know. It’s just that the sooner I’m pissed off my face the better I will feel, that’s all.’

Constance was dying to ask the two of them what they had placed on Matt’s coffin, but she knew it must have been some pretty personal things, so she bided her time. She asked some general questions about the things Matt and Peter had gotten up to in their time in London together, and then after they moved to Spain. She let the gins flow, and the small talk continue until she thought it was an appropriate moment. While they were on their third gins, she delicately broached the subject. She knew she would be on firmer ground with Connor, he was more of a chatterbox than Peter, who seemed rather reserved, especially about the more private aspects of his life, so she started with him.

‘Connor, what was that book you put into Matt’s grave?’

‘Oh, he’ll love that. That’s a fine collection of Irish poetry. Something for him to read while he’s waiting for the bus to take him upstairs.’

‘I see, you like poetry? Have you written any yourself?’

‘I have indeed. But you know what they say, Ireland is full of poets. Drunks, and poets. The two seem to go hand in hand. The more you drink, the more poetic you become.’

Constance smiled. She really felt at ease with Matt’s friends. Delicately she broached the subject with Peter.

‘What about you, Peter, what was that you placed on his coffin?’

Peter’s answer was curt, and left no room for further questions.

‘It was a letter saying all the things New Zealand men can’t say to each other.’

The reply was short, but Constance had no further need of explanation. She understood perfectly the mentality of Kiwi, and Aussie men. Whereas Spanish men would kiss, and hug openly, the more restrained men from the antipodes would limit themselves to a slap on the back, or a punch on the shoulder. Intimacy was a thing they felt inside, but would never publicly display. In any case, she had no doubt that Matt had felt the same way about his friend Peter.

‘And what was it yourself and Matt always found to chat about?’ Connor asked her.

Constance was somewhat surprised.

‘Oh, didn’t he tell you? He used to tell me stories about his adventures in Australia, back in the late 70’s, in his hippy period.’

Both Peter and Connor perked up at that news. Connor was the first to get a reply in.

‘You’re kidding me? The bugger was a bloody hippy back in the day? What a laugh!’

Peter was surprised by the news as well.

‘Really? I knew that he had spent some time over is Aus, like a lot of Kiwis have, but I had no idea he had been a hippy over there. Mind you, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised really. We definitely had plenty of interesting times in London, that’s for sure. What sort of tales did he tell you?’

‘Oh, lots really. In the late 70’s he was over there for a few years. He would just sort of chat about the people he met, the times they lived in. I was born in 1984, so my memories really begin from the 90’s. By the time that I was growing up, the hippy period he had lived through had long gone, so it was really interesting to hear about how things had been before. In Australia it had been almost an historic era. My father grew up in that period,too. For me it was all really interesting.’

‘You know,’ said Peter, ‘I would love to hear some of those stories. If you have time can we meet up, and have a chat about those days?’

Constance could hear in Peter’s voice a sense of longing, a desire to keep alive his friend’s memory. Something she, too, wanted to do.

‘Of course. I would love that too.’

‘I have a bit of a feeling,’ interjected Connor, ‘that they are going to have to be accompanied by the consumption of much gin.’

All three of them laughed. It felt so good to Constance that they could laugh, on that, the saddest of all days. She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Well, they always were. So I guess we should maintain the custom.’

Connor threw up his hands, as if in a sign of surrender.

‘It looks like I better get used to this gin stuff, then. No more beer for me. Mind you, I must admit, it certainly has a nice kick to it, it does.’

Peter smiled across the table at Connor.

‘All those years that Matt tried to convert you have finally paid off.’

Connor roared with laughter.

‘Well, the good man would certainly get a good laugh at that. He finally broke me!’

Peter looked at his watch.

‘I think it’s time to get Bianca to bring us something to eat. I hope you like Paella, Constance. I’ve organised with Bianca to cook us up a bit of a cracker. We better get some food into us, it’s going to be a long day.’

‘Of course, I love it. Paella and gin sounds like something that would have been close to Matt’s heart.’

Peter laughed.

‘Actually he pretty much drank gin with everything. Listen none of us will be driving home today, so don’t worry. Bianca will get someone to run us all home in your car, if you like, and I’ll shoot out and pick up mine tomorrow.’

‘Great, actually I was a bit worried about that. I don’t really like drinking and driving.’

‘Well if you like drinking and eating, with a great view of the sea, you’re definitely in the right place.’ Connor added.

‘There you go, Constance,’ said Peter, ‘the Irish poet has arrived.’

The laughter grew more contagious. Constance felt really happy about that. The funeral had been a place for tears, and sadness. The bar they were in was a place for laughter, and the sharing of fond memories. It felt good to be in Matt’s favourite bar, and to be able to remember him with happiness, and to hear the flow of laughter. Constance felt that she had known Matt for such a long time, because he had become a big part of her life, but on reflection, she had only met him about six or seven months previously. In such a short time he had had such a great influence on her. She felt that the changes she had been going through were in a large part all because of having met him. Meeting, and getting to know Matthew had changed her life. Or maybe, better still, knowing him had helped her to change her outlook on life. As she looked out at the sea’s waves, she could remember precisely the first time that she

had seen him.

Chapter 2 Swimming With Dogs

The day dawned slowly for Constance. She lay there in bed with a terrible headache, knowing that she had drunk far too much wine the evening before, as usual. Cheap wine. The sort that gives you a bad hangover the day after. With a sigh, she dragged herself out of her bed, and shuffled into the bathroom. The first order of the day was to splash her face with cold water, hoping that that would bring some form of life back to her. That was the hope. The reality, as usual, was somewhat different. As she dried her face with a hand towel she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her chubby face stared back at her, almost accusingly. She hated what she saw. Her short brown hair did nothing to hide her puffed up cheeks. Looking at her reflection further down, her nightgown did nothing to hide the swell of her overweight body. Who was she kidding? Overweight? She was fat. A big fat whale. How was it possible that she had let herself get to that point? How could she look so terrible at only 34 years old? God only knew what she would look like when she was actually old. In that moment there was nothing she liked about herself. Even her name. Constance. Constant. A name that means normal, invariable, nothing out of the usual. You will find nothing of interest here. Who would give their child a name like that? It was the equivalent of labeling your child as someone who will never amount to anything other than the ordinary. Well, they had been right. She had been labeled correctly. She was a nobody, living a nothing life, trapped in an ugly, fat body. She let her nightgown slip to the floor, so that she could see in the mirror just how disgusting she was in her totality. The full, unhidden reality. No wonder Jeff would sneak off in the middle of the night, after having had sex with her. Who would want to wake up next to a fat, ugly woman like her? She turned on the shower, and let the warm water flow over her body. She closed her eyes and let the stream of the water wash over her head. Hopefully it would wash away her hangover, and maybe some of her fat as well. Theoretically living in Spain was supposed to be good for you. The famous mediterranean diet, and all that. Well, it hadn't worked for her. Mind you, copious amounts of chocolate bars never got a mention in that diet. As the hot water tried desperately, but in vain, to wash the feeling of disgust from her, she vowed to trade in her chocolate for lovely Spanish salads, with just a light sprinkling of olive oil. She had to make a change. She would make a change. The day had come to turn her life around. She laughed out loud at the thought of that, but straight away her laughter turned to sorrow, as she thought of all the times she had promised herself

that. A New Year's Resolution, made, and broken, every other week. Many promises had been made, always with what had seemed to be the best of intentions, yet there she was, still fat, still hating herself, and still deluding herself with empty promises of change. She dried herself off, making a point of not looking in the mirror. She had had enough self disgust for one day. In fact, she was probably all set for whole of the following week. Constance dressed in her usual style of billowing clothes, maybe some people would be fooled by them. She fixed herself her usual breakfast of a cup of tea, and a couple of slices of wholemeal bread toasted, with a lot of butter and marmalade spread on. She refused to read how much sugar was in the marmalade, although she knew full well from having previously read the small print that there was 60mg per 100mg. 60% sugar. Anyway, it didn't matter that much because she always finished off her breakfast with a nice big piece of chocolate, just to give her some energy to face the day. What was she supposed to eat for breakfast? Salad? At least being Sunday she didn't have to work, so she could pack her self loathing away in a box, put it in the cupboard for the day, and go for a walk down on the beach. She would take a day off from being herself. She would have a holiday from being the constant, nothing out of the ordinary, person who she was. Constance put on her light summer shoes, and headed towards the door.

She almost made it out, almost. Her phone which she had put in her pocket started ringing, and as soon as she looked at it she could see from the prefix that it was a call from Australia. The number was unfamiliar, but she knew who it would be. Her mother. Her mother always phoned her with pre-paid phone cards, so the numbers were always different, but the prefix was a dead give away. She declined the call, turned her phone off, and then dropped it on the shelf by the door. She had had her fair share of self loathing for the day, she certainly didn't need her mother to put the boot in by telling her, again, how disappointed she was in her. She would save that misery for another day. Constance would pretend all was well in her life, and go for a walk along the beach. It was early spring, and the Spanish sun was already starting to get warm. As she walked down towards the beach she almost felt optimistic. Well, almost. If she had been someone else she would have been feeling really well, but unfortunately, she couldn't shake off the feeling of being who she was. The sight of the beach, as always, filled Constance with delight. It was beautiful. The magical rays of the sun reflected off the deep blue colour of the water, creating a breathtaking sight. If nothing else, she had really made a good decision to move to the south of Spain. Especially after the cold, damp years she had spent in Dublin. Somehow, she had managed to get something right. No doubt probably by mistake, rather than by design. Nonetheless, it was something that had worked out for her. One of the few things that ever had.

As it was still early spring there weren't many people around, which was just how

Constance liked it. As soon as she stepped onto the beach she took her shoes off. The soothing feel of the sand massaged her feet, bringing her a sense of ease. She loved walking barefoot along the beach. It was the only place where she could let go of the anxiety that constantly gripped her, and just feel the beauty around her. Become one with it. It was therapeutic. It was her form of lying on a psychiatrist's couch, and letting out all her inner worries. The warm sun, the soft sand, and the rolling waves coming up onto the beach brought her a feeling of peacefulness. Constance enjoyed watching the people there, imagining stories behind their lives. She could see two children playing with their dog. Why didn't she have a dog? The children were laughing, happily, as they ran around with their dog. She would get a dog. Something that would love her unconditionally, something that would be a constant in her life. She burst out laughing. She would name her dog Constance. She would send a photo of her dog to her mother, with the name Constance written on the back, with the phrase: 'What a good name for a dog'. Maybe that had been what her mother had wanted? A dog? A plaything to run around obediently following her every command.

Ahead of her, sitting on a blanket spread out on the sand, she saw an older man, probably around his late 50's, or early 60's. There was something about his posture that caught Constance's attention. He was sitting erect, with his back straight, instead of the usual hunched over way people sat. For his age he was still very good looking, with a face reflecting his years, but showing character. His hair, although greying, still had a strong black hue to it. He had a lean physique, the body of a man who kept himself in shape. How could anyone get to that age and still look good? How was that possible, with all of life's temptations laid at your feet. It occurred to her to stop, and ask him for some advice. Advice on how to lose her fat, how to sit up straight, how to live well. She would like to ask him if she could be someone else. Someone not named Constance. As she passed in front of him, the man looked up from the book he was reading, and smiled at her. Constance tried to smile back, but she was sure that it had ended up coming out more as a scowl, than anything else. Why couldn't she smile anymore? Constance walked, and walked, along the beach, inventing stories about all the people she saw, stories that had happy endings. The warming effect of the sun made her forget herself. She was someone else. Someone good. Someone happy.

With a start she remembered that she was supposed to meet Jeff for lunch. She reached into her pocket for her phone, to see what time it was. In a panic she remembered that she had left it at home. A sense of fear came over her. If she was late she knew that Jeff would be very angry with her. She hurried towards the first person she saw.

'Excuse me, do you have the time?'

'Sure, it's just gone 20 minutes after 12.'

‘Thanks very much.’

Constance started running back along the beach. She only had barely 20 minutes to get to the Tapas bar where she had arranged to meet Jeff for lunch, and a drink. Her heart was racing because she knew that she couldn’t make it in time. Normally Jeff would always be late, but Constance just knew that on this of all days he would not only be on time, he would no doubt be early. Tears welled up in her eyes. The tranquil feeling the beach had given her was now no more than a distant memory. She left the beach, and after hurriedly putting on her shoes, she ran along the street. Sweat started to form on her fat body, and her breath quickened with all the exertion. As the outdoors tables of the Tapas bar came into view she could see him there, fidgeting in his seat. She slowed down, to try and catch her breath.

‘I’m sorry I’m late, Jeff, I left my phone at...’

‘Just look at you! You’re all sweaty. My God Connie, what sort of way is this to present yourself? Will you please go to the bathroom, and clean yourself up.’

‘I’m sorry, I...’

‘Connie, go!’

Constance hurried into the bathroom, and quickly tried to clean herself. She dried the sweat off her face, and under her armpits with the small paper towels. She refused to look at herself in the mirror. She could do without further self hatred. Why did she always do these things? Why did she always mess things up? What was wrong with her? She was lucky to have found a boyfriend like Jeff, but for some reason she could never treat him as she should. She knew that she didn’t deserve him, and that eventually he would dump her, which was just what she deserved, given how she would always let him down. Feeling like a total failure, she walked back out to the table where Jeff was waiting. His biting tongue was not long in coming.

‘Well, thanks for ruining lunch Connie. That was so nice of you.’

Constance held back the tears she could feel coming.

‘I’m so sorry Jeff, it’s just that my mother phoned this morning, and I have been in a bit of a spin ever since.’

‘Go and order a couple of plates of mixed Tapas, and a couple of beers, and then you can tell me all about what the old bag wanted.’

‘Well, actually... yes, of course.’

Constance hurried into the bar and ordered their lunch. Somehow she had managed to ruin their lovely Sunday lunch date. Could she never get anything right? With a baneful feeling she returned to the table.

‘So, what was the problem this time? What was she moaning about?’

‘Actually I didn’t actually answer her call. I...’

‘What? What the hell?’

Jeff’s voice was raised. He was obviously very irritated.

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