

One Year of Life

K. J. Tesar

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1. When paths cross

It felt good to be out on the town with his best friend. He watched, and smiled, as his friend chatted away about all and sundry, pretending to be interested in all the latest happenings. Dave was in fine fettle, waving his arms around as he relayed the latest developments in his life, and life in general. James's part in the conversation was minimal. Dave would talk enough for the two of them. That was their way. That was the way it had been since time eternal. Not that James minded at all, anyway he was well used to being Dave's sounding board. When Dave was in top form he needed an audience, rather than a conversation partner. Dave was the showman, amazing his band of faithful spectators with all the finery of his stagecraft. James was this evenings guest of honour, with a special show all for himself. Really, for James, it was just nice to be with his friend, to have someone he could count on in this, his new life. His attempt at a new life. A life trying to repress the demons that had haunted him for so long, had been very difficult to discover. For the most part it had involved refinding himself. Trying to determine if he still existed, if he could still exist. He wouldn't interrupt Dave with such heavy thoughts. Dave's theatrical performance was at it's high point. He would just continue, happily, in his role as Dave's congregation. He would get T-shirts made up: 'Dave, my Lord and Master, forever shall I follow thy lead'

'Maureen is really upset about her accident. Hey, I told her, don't worry, it's really on a few dents and scratches. We'll sort it out.'

'Uh huh.'

James already knew all the details of the accident, Dave had related it all to him previously on the phone, but he let Dave have full rein. As if he could ever have stopped him anyway. He mumbled some banal response.

'Well, the main thing is that she's alright. The rest is just life's little inconveniences.'

'Well, that's what I told her. She walked away from it. The rest is just insurance claims.'

James sat back and listened, as his friend went through all the story again. His mind drifted. He thought of the drastic changes in his life over the last year, or so. It hadn't been easy starting over, recreating himself. After many years of marriage, and the suffering they had endured, it had been hard to finally accept that the best thing for both of them was that he had to have the courage to leave her, and get started on a new path. He had done it for her as much as for himself. Together they would never have been at peace. Each reminded the other constantly of the burden they carried. Alone perhaps they

would each be able to find a pathway through the desolation. A pathway towards the possibility of finding, if not happiness, at least a bit of solace. A pathway taking them to where they could find an easier pathway to travel. At 36 years old James had hoped that he was still young enough to reconstruct himself. To discover a new James. It had taken determination, and a lot of bad days, but he had made it through. Almost. He felt that he was at the other end of the tunnel, or maybe to put it better, he could see the light at the end of the tunnel. A beacon guiding him towards a possible future. One of the best things about his new life was, without a doubt, his new job. It was at the same time relatively interesting, but also just easy enough that James was able to effortlessly pass the day, impress his bosses, and all without having to push himself very hard at all. Not that he was lazy, far from it. He had just felt that he had needed to slow it all down, and start again, from the beginning. He had wanted to find himself, who he was, rather than just be identified by the job he performed. A new town, a new flat, and a new job. Big changes. Luckily he still had Dave to help him through it all. And that was no small thing.

‘Are there any decent looking women at this new job of yours? You know you should really get back out there dating again, Jimmy.’

‘No, they are all men.’

James knew where Dave was going, so he tried to brush him off with a bit of a lie, but anyway, Dave, with a new head of steam, continued on with his favourite rant about how it was time to get back in the saddle. If you crashed your bike into a brick wall, destroying your bike, and causing grave injury to yourself, the answer was simple. Get a new new bike. Avoid brick walls. James politely listened to him, nodding occasionally, in the appropriate places. He thought about the transformation his life had undertaken. A total transformation that had taken a lot of effort. Without any doubt, in the end it had been really the only possible solution. Months after the separation he had come to the realisation that he needed to get away from all the memories that surrounded him, the memories that haunted him. Living in the same town, seeing the same people, had made him feel as if there was always a weight he constantly carried with him. It was a weight he would always carry, but through distancing himself the burden he carried was slightly less present. The memories weighing heavily, had dragged him down psychologically, keeping him in the mindset of their tragedy. It had taken a lot of courage on his part, to break away, and James had worried that at 36 years old he may have been too old to restart afresh. Surprisingly, though, from a purely practical point of view, it had all gone fairly well. Better than he had been expecting. He was now at a point where he really felt that the worst was over, and ahead he had the possibility of good things to come. It was a nice feeling. Life was out there, just waiting for him, almost within his grasp. He could sense it’s presence, even if he couldn’t quite see it yet. He felt that he was on the verge of something good. Life. Life may well be possible. Not that he would ever forget Charlie, or what had happened. Charlie would be with him forever. James just wanted to be able to live, as well as remember, and staying in his marriage had made that seem almost

impossible. He had had no other choice than to leave, leave it all behind. Without a doubt, his best friend Dave, had helped him a lot in the transition. He had been with him all the way. He owed him a lot. It was a debt that could never be repaid.

‘Listen, Jimmy, the one on the right has been checking you out, my man. When are you going to make a move?’

‘What’s that Dave?’

James hadn’t really been listening to his friend, he had just been enjoying being out with him, breathing in the air. Breathing in life.

‘At the next table, brother. The blonde. She is just waiting for you, my man.’

As usual, Dave was trying to push his friend to get back into life, in the form of a relationship. Dave’s philosophy was that when you fell off a bicycle you should immediately get back on it, and start pedaling, with no time for licking your wounds. Dave’s pragmatic approach allowed no room for introspection, or retrospection. There was only one way. Forward. At a great pace of knots. It was a lovely spring evening, and the two friends were sitting at an outside table of a bar in the town where James now lived. The bar was a hive of activity, people chatting and laughing, as they ate and drank. The town centre was alive with lots of noise, and the smells of many different types of food. You could smell the scent of life in the air. You could hear the sounds of life being lived. It had been a lovely warm day, and the streets were full of people, of all ages, out enjoying themselves. The curse of winter had been lifted, and life was flourishing anew. At the next table there was a group of three women, roughly the same age as the two of them, around their mid 30’s. The girls had been looking over, and one, a very good looking blonde, had been looking, discretely, but very intently, at James. Her glances hadn’t gone unnoticed, not even by James.

‘I know, she looks good, but I just don’t think I’m ready to jump back in yet.’

‘Hey, you’ve been separated for over a year, now. The time is right, and she is really looking good! Come on boy, get a move on!’

Dave had only one view of life. Live it. Love it. Lap it up.

‘Don’t think I don’t appreciate your help, Dave, I probably couldn’t have made it through the separation, and everything else, without your help, but, well, I just don’t think I am ready to go through all of that again. Not yet, anyway.’

James never mentioned Charlie’s name to Dave. He knew that Dave just couldn’t face talking about what had happened. It was too much for him.

‘All of that? What? Jimmy, I’m not saying you have to fall in love, marry her, and live happily ever after! Just have some fun, loosen up a bit. Man, you are wound so tight. A few dates, see what happens. Get her into bed, have a bit of a romp. Some sex would be good for you. Relax you a bit.’

James smiled. How could you possibly face the twists and turns of life, without a Dave by your side? Everybody needed a Dave. A guide, a pathfinder, to keep you on the right track. The thought occurred to him to open up a business renting out Daves to

people facing troubling situations. Is your life getting to be too much for you? Are you finding it hard to cope? In just two to three months one of our Daves will help you find the way through your hardships, and back to the life you have always wanted. Our Daves are only of the highest quality. Money back guarantee. They will get you back on your bike in no time at all.

‘Listen, Dave, when I feel that I’m ready I will get back out there. There’s no hurry. I just need time.’

As usual, when Dave had an idea in his head, there was no holding him back. He was a great friend, but he never took on board anyone else’s opinions. He knew the right thing to do, and he would push you until you did it. With his longish brown hair, and his rugged, rugby player look, you couldn’t really call him handsome, but he was definitely a person who didn’t go unnoticed. He had decided that he knew exactly what was best for his friend, and even the hand of God would have been hard pressed to rein him in. With his brash personality, and total disregard for what James wanted, he threw himself into his mission. He turned his attention to the three women at the next table.

‘Good evening ladies, how are things? This is a great spot, isn’t it? What more could you want on a Friday evening? Good company, good drink, the pleasures of life!’

Dave had been turned up, by a hidden remote control, to his highest setting. Uncontrollable. The women looked over, and all three smiled in response. One of them, a slightly plump woman, with short dark hair, cut in a page boy style, took up the invitation.

‘Yes, it really is. The three of us usually meet her every Friday, for a few drinks, and a bit of a chat. I’ve never noticed you guys here before. Mind you, it does get crowded, especially in the good weather.’

‘No, it’s our first time, well, mine anyway. I don’t know if Jimmy has been here before. I live about an hour’s drive away, and I’ve just popped over to see my mate. He’s only been living here for a few months. Hey, my name is Dave, and this is Jimmy, James really, but I always call him Jimmy.’

‘Hi, I’m Emma, and this is Vicky, and Lucy.’

Lucy, the one who had been looking at Dave, smiled, and with a bit of a blush on her cheeks, greeted them.

‘Hello, it’s nice to meet you.’

‘Hi guys,’ said Vicky, ‘it’s a pleasure to meet you.’

Vicky with her long, curly brown hair was a lot more attractive than Emma, who, with her short plump figure, really didn’t look particularly attractive, especially with her hair cut so short. It accentuated the chubbiness of her face. The best looking one, of the three, was definitely the blonde, Lucy. The one who had been checking out James. She was beautiful, with long blonde hair, and a trim figure. In some difficult way to explain she had a sort of mysterious air of reticence about her. She didn’t seem as unrestrained as her friends, she appeared to be a bit more reserved. A bit more guarded. She certainly

was pretty. James was a bit flustered, it hadn't been his intention to get chatting with the women, as he thought he had explained, thoroughly, to Dave, but he knew that he had better say something. Dave had thrown him under the bus. He had been sacrificed at Dave's altar of total disregard for all others. He was like a baby who had been thrown into the deep end of the swimming pool, and had to either sink or swim.

'Hi, actually I have been here once before, for lunch.'

He was slightly annoyed at his friend, even though he knew that Dave had just been mistakenly trying to help him. He couldn't really hold it against him. He never could. That was just how Dave was. That was how his Dave was programmed.

Lucy, as if sensing his hesitancy, smiled at James, and said;

'Yes, they really do a nice lunch here. A lot of office workers come here for lunch. I've had lunch here a few times as well.'

Vicky, who was very good looking with her long curly brown hair, tall, well proportioned figure, and sweet smile, looked over at the two friends.

'Me and Emma only really get out here for our Friday drinks. Normally we are on kids duty, but our lovely husbands let us have at least one night off. So nice of them! We really are so terribly grateful to them! Obviously, that comes at a price, of course. Saturday nights we are in, and they go off, and do whatever they want to. Lucky Lucy, on the other hand, can always just go out whenever she wants to, being single.'

James almost squirmed in his seat. It seemed almost as if the lot of them were conspiring to get him, and Lucy, together. It didn't take long for Dave to run with the ball. He wasn't going to let an opportunity like that get past him. He would take advantage of any slight opening. He would put both his hands through the crack, and rip open a doorway. He threw himself in.

'Hey, I know what you mean. I have that sort of a deal with my wife as well. My mate Jimmy, on the other hand, is living the good life. He's a single man, does whatever he wants, whenever he wants.'

James could see Lucy perk up at that news. She really was beautiful. Her face was almost glowing, caught radiantly in the light from the overhead lamps. Her figure was slim, and her smile was so genuine that James almost had to catch his breath. Her long blonde hair cascaded on her shoulders, and brushed the sides of her cheeks. Lucy was dressed casually, but with tight fitting clothes that really showed off her beautiful, trim figure. She was at the same time very sensual, but she also had a sort of wholesome simplicity. There was no denying that he was very attracted to her, but James worried that if he started something with her, it could end up blooming rapidly into something big. Something that at this point in his life he just didn't feel he was ready for, quite apart from what the rest of the group seemed to think. He would casually ignore the plottings of Dave and Lucy's friends. Lucy obviously had a couple of the female versions of Dave in her life as well.

'Sorry to break up the party,' said Emma, 'but it's time for my curfew. It's been

lovely to meet the two of you. We are usually here on a Friday evening, from around 8 o'clock to 10. Hopefully we will see you here another time?'

As the three women were getting ready to go, Dave just couldn't help himself. He couldn't let an invitation like that go begging.

'For sure. If I can't make it over, I'm sure Jimmy will.'

The two groups of friends said their goodbyes, and the three women went off down the street, giggling, and chatting among themselves.

'Well, that went well! That Lucy is just perfect for you, my friend. You can't deny that.'

Dave slapped James on his shoulder. His face bore a massive grin, running from ear to ear. He looked like an athlete who had just made the score of the season. He had scored the winning try in the rugby season final.

'No, she definitely is a lovely person, that's for sure. But, listen, I'm just not ready yet, Dave. Hey, I told you that, man. Come on, I'll walk you back to your car.'

The two friends walked back to the carpark where Dave had left his car. James felt so indebted to his friend. His separation, after seven years of marriage, and the tragedy that had fallen to them, had been hard on him. As a couple they had had other couples as friends, but in the breakup it had all been a bit unsure just where the mutual friends lay. The terrain underfoot had become unsteady. Solid footpaths had turned into muddy, slippery tracks. Pathways on which it was difficult to find your footing. Some had taken his wife's side in the separation, others were unsure which side, if any, to take. James knew, and understood, that none of them could possibly know how the tragedy that they had earlier faced had affected them as a couple. It was the sort of thing you had to live through to understand. All in all, it had left a sort of slight awkwardness when they would meet, making for difficult evenings out, with stilted, guarded, conversation. Dave, on the other hand, had been his friend since they had been at university together. There had never been any doubts where his loyalties laid. He was the only real friend that James knew he could rely on, and he had really needed that friendship to help him through the tempestuous storms he had encountered. His loyal guide hadn't let him down. He had found his Dave.

'Here you go Dave. Drive carefully, I know you always do. Thanks for everything, man. I'm sorry I moved away, but I just couldn't stay there anymore. Everywhere, and everyone, well, it just all reminded me of everything. I just had to get away. Start somewhere fresh.'

Dave, as usual, avoided talking about the pain that had afflicted James. Dave just couldn't bring himself to talk about it.

'What? Are you kidding me? It's only about a 45 minute drive. That's not going to get in our way. I think you've done the right thing, moving somewhere new. It's taking control, brother, it's getting back into life on your own terms. It was a good move, Jimmy. I will be with you all the way, you know that, don't you? Anyway, think about

Lucy, will you? Just go back to that bar, next week, and see what happens.'

Dave smiled, gave his friend a slap on the shoulders, and got into his car. As he pulled out of the carpark he tooted the horn, and waved his arm out the window, smiling broadly. Jimmy waved back. Even if they didn't see each other as much anymore, they spoke very often on the phone. It was good to have someone to be able to pour out all of your thoughts with. From the carpark it was only about a ten minute walk back to his flat. James enjoyed walking. It gave him time to slow down, and reflect on things. Dave was right, the move to a new town really had done him a lot of good. He felt a freeness that enveloped him. In all honesty, it was even pretty promising to have met someone like Lucy. Just knowing that life could go on gave him a happy feeling. For a long while he hadn't really been sure if he would have survived the suffering that had crashed down on him. All in all, he was feeling quite positive, even though he knew he wasn't going to return to that bar the next Friday. He needed time. He still needed time. James had never been as light, and, well, slightly flippant as his friend. Dave was one of those people who could just breeze through life, seemingly never affected by the deep emotional feelings that most people felt, and that almost plagued James. Everything seemed to feel so intense to James, friendships lost, new ones gained, but for Dave it all just flowed over him effortlessly. For that, James really envied his friend. The lightness with which he approached life was a wonder to see. James, himself, had a tendency to feel everything so acutely. When he got involved in something, or with someone, he ended up going all the way. Emotionally he just wasn't ready for that. It was too soon. He was still damaged goods. When he would be ready, he knew that a woman like Lucy would be exactly the sort of person he would look for. Apart from her great beauty, she really seemed like a genuine, honest person, almost a rare breed in the modern age. He could never imagine himself with a female version of Dave, someone just cruising through life, without feeling it's depths. A female version of Dave? The thought of that made him smile to himself. Pity the poor man who ended up with her! Also, another thing he liked about Lucy was that she seemed to be a fairly reserved person, like himself, and that definitely was the sort of woman he would like to be with. Her two friends were much more loquacious, slightly loud. Dave's type of girls. James smiled at the recollection of how Dave had so effortlessly reeled them all in. He was a fisherman of people. He had used the right bait, and had hooked his catch. Somehow or other, he could just enter into other people's lives, with a casualness that seemed almost to disarm his prey. They would be temporarily stunned, leaving them easy fodder as he pulled them in, in his net. Lucy, though, well she seemed different. All in all, Lucy definitely was the sort of woman he could eventually go out with, but he just didn't feel that he could deal with such a commitment at this stage of his life. He had only just managed to set up his new life, and it was running smoothly. He had a new job, in a new town, and he was trying to come to terms with his painful past. He was moving forwards. Moving forwards, holding onto Charlie. Charlie would always be a part of his life. Tears formed in his eyes as he thought

of Charlie. As he walked towards his new flat, tears flowed freely down his cheeks.

It was a lovely evening, and Lucy, as usual, had been looking forward to it all week. Her Friday evening out with her two best friends was the highlight of her week. To be honest, it was just about the only thing she enjoyed about the week. It was the only time she would ever go out. In fact, if one or the other of her friends canceled, she would feel that the whole week had been ruined. Her evening out with her two best friends, her only real friends, was just about all she had to look forward to in her life. Being single, without children, in her mid 30's, made her feel like an absolute failure. Life's smile hadn't shined on her. She quite liked her job, it was a pleasant enough way to pass the day, but she didn't really bond with her colleagues. They were mostly all much older than her. She felt sort of estranged from them, and for the most part, also from much of society in general. She didn't really seem to be able to fit in anywhere. She could only really open up with her two best friends. Both of them, however, seemed to have such busy, full lives, with not much time for going out, barely even for an occasional coffee. Lucy understood that they had their husbands, and children, and elderly parents to look after, but it all left her feeling very lonely. It was almost as if she lived in a void, a state of flux, waiting to be pulled out for her once a week moment of living, before being returned to her state of nowhere. She was a person who existed briefly. She tried to avoid thinking of herself as being a sad, lonely person, but really, deep down, she knew that she was. She never let her friends know how she felt, she didn't want to make them feel sorry for her, or feel they had to see her more often. When she was with them she would pretend to have a good life, to be happy, which, when she was with them, she was. She would pretend to be busy with all her hobbies, and work, and everything, just like them. Just like normal people. The reality was that time passed very slowly for her. Both of her parents had died when she was barely 18, in a freak car accident caused by bad weather. Since then she had been alone. Lucy had had a very tight bond with her mother, and still thought about her, and missed her, almost every day. All she had left of her family was an aunty. And, in all honesty, she wasn't really much in the way of what Lucy perceived as real family. She only saw her irregularly, and when they did meet up they got along well enough, but there was no special connection between them. There was something missing between them. It was almost as if they had the title deeds saying they were family, but the paper work had been mixed up somewhere along the way, and they were really just two strangers who had been mistakenly placed together. They were officially family, but in reality they had no idea who each other was, or why they continued to see each other. It was all a case of mistaken identity. In any case, she would really prefer to meet people her own age, with interests similar to hers, so she wasn't really bothered about the odd relationship she had with her aunt. That was just the way it was. Friday evening seemed to be just about all she had to look forward to in her life. As she approached the bar where she usually met her friends, she was really looking forward to seeing them. With

them she could chat freely. She could let herself go, something which, at work, she never did. As usual, she was the first to arrive at the bar, she was always a bit early. She found a nice table outside, and waited patiently for her friends. Before too long she saw them approaching. She stood up to greet them as they entered the patio area of the bar.

‘Hey, you two, how are things?’

Emma and Vicky danced over to her table, singing, and clicking their fingers. They were always happy to fool around when they didn’t have kids, and husbands, to look after.

‘Hello, lovely lady,’ said Emma, ‘you look so radiant tonight! What’s the big occasion? Is there someone coming we don’t know anything about?’

The two of them sat down, giggling like school girls. They really loved their evening off from family duties. ‘Friday Freedom’, as they called it. The two of them were so full of life. Lucy really envied their happiness, and the fulfillment of their lives. They had it all. Everything that she didn’t.

‘Don’t be silly, just my special girls. I’ll get some drinks in. The usual?’

Vicky jumped up. She had a triumphant air about her.

‘My shout! And we are having doubles! I have some big news, Abigail seems to have finally accepted that she has to go to school. She almost enjoys it.’

She threw her head back, and raised the back of her hand up against her forehead in a dramatic flourish.

‘My God! What a relief!’

As Vicky headed off for the drinks, Emma smiled, knowingly.

‘My two boys loved going to school straight away. For them it was an adventure. Poor little Abigail! Six years old and having to leave her mommy! Oh, how sad!’

‘Don’t be so cruel.’ chastised Lucy. ‘It really is harder for a little girl.’

As usual, Lucy knew that most of the discussion would be about the children of her friends, but she was used to that, even though she would really have preferred to talk about other things, like they used to in the old days. Still, now that was the central thing in their lives, so she accepted it. She had avoided, as much as possible, being dragged into the role of aunty to their children. Seeing her friends, being with them, and with their children, really drove it home to her just how empty her life was. At her age, 35, she was virtually the only woman she knew who wasn’t married, with children. She had had the occasional romance long ago in the past, but had never found the right person for her. Love, and happiness, had eluded her. She was sure it existed, but just not in the same dimension as her. Lucy was quite introverted, and all the men she had met seemed to be so loud, and pushy. That was something she just couldn’t stand. Probably she had set her standards too high, but anyway, here she found herself, left on the shelf. Unwanted, and past her sell by date. Thrown out with life’s rubbish. Ahead of her just a life of emptiness, sadness, and regret. Eventually she knew she would have to surrender totally, and get a cat. That would be the final sign of her desolation. That would mark the end of

everything. She was almost looking forward to it. Then there would be no doubt. It was over. She would be able to post funny pictures of her cat on the internet, just like all the other women who had finished living in the real world.

‘Get these into you girls. You just will not believe the change in Abigail.’

Lucy listened to all the chatter about their children. She really was happy for her friends. She fought back the sadness, and threw herself into the chatter. After all, she really was so happy to be out with them. None of them were really big drinkers but, with a couple of drinks in them the talk finally got off family matters. Vicky turned to Lucy with a sparkle in her eyes.

‘Mike is doing a barbecue on Sunday, for some of his rugby mates. I think some of them will be bringing their wives. Why don’t you come, Lucy? Some of them are single. What do you say?’

Vicky, and Emma, were always trying to find someone for Lucy, but their social circles were now so diminished by family matters, that by then Lucy knew all the men on offer, and wasn’t interested in any of them. Lucy knew that Vicky’s intentions were good, but at those barbecues she always ended up being hit on by all of Vicky’s husband’s friends, single and married. They were all heavy drinkers, and when the drink flowed heavily they would all look around for an available woman. Who better than her? The spinster friend of Mike’s wife. The sad and lonely one. In all probability, they no doubt felt like they would be doing her a favour. Perk her up with a quickie out in the back seat of their car. That would be just what she needed to bring a smile to her face. In the past she had suffered the indignity of a couple of those barbecues, and there was no way could she bring herself to ever go through all that again. It all just served to reinforce how lonely, and desperate, she must appear to everyone. Lonely she was, but not that desperate. Well, not yet anyway. When she had her cat she would reconsider her position on that.

‘Oh, I can’t. I promised my aunt that I would go and see her Sunday. Thanks anyway.’

It was more a half-truth rather than a lie, but she really couldn’t handle the thought of an afternoon of uncouth drunks, all trying to have sex with her. She would far prefer the oddness of her relationship with her aunt, rather than the sordidness of those drunken affairs.

‘Hey, watch up!’ whispered Emma. ‘Look at these two, at the next table! My God! Lucy! The one with the short hair isn’t wearing a wedding ring. He looks absolutely divine!’

Here we go again, thought Lucy, as she looked over. Usually her friends would try and set her up with anyone, as long as he was single, and breathing. With a bit of a startle, she realised that the one Emma meant, really was good looking. He had a lovely face, with a sort of pronounced chin. He was quite athletic looking, like someone who looked after himself, and exercised regularly. He had short dark hair, and a pleasant

demeanour about him, like someone who was comfortable in himself, but without feeling like he had to show off in front of others. Lucy was immediately taken by him. He had a softness to his face, with a look of quiet strength. His friend, someone who reminded Lucy of Emma's husband Jerry, not at all her type of person, was doing all the talking, and the good looking one was politely listening, for the most part. He seemed so handsome. His face was that of what Lucy thought to be a kind, gentle person. As she stole glances at him, she couldn't help thinking how that was the sort of man she could really fall for. Her two friends were in total delirium. They were concocting their moves. Plans were afoot. Strategies were being formulated. Maps were being laid out, and preparations were being made for the final assault. The troops were all in position on the border, just waiting for the order to attack. Vicky leaned across the table, in a conspiratorial way.

'Lucy, shall I invite them over? The other guy has a wedding ring on, but we can run interference with him. We'll keep him busy, and you get talking with the handsome one. What do you say?'

'No, Vicky, please, don't embarrass me.'

Emma, too, was on the warpath.

'Hey, we can't let this opportunity go, Lucy. This is big. Come on, you, get in the game!'

Lucy really wanted to meet her attractive man, but she knew that her friends would go overboard with the whole thing, and she would end up feeling very flustered. However Vicky wasn't going to let an opportunity like this pass. She turned to Emma.

'How can we play this?'

Emma wasn't going to let the occasion pass either. Their friend needed a bit of back-up. Lucy really was just so shy, both her friends knew she needed a hand with the introductions, and a gentle nudge in the right direction. Emma seemed on the point of saying something, but, in the event, it was the friend of the good looking one who got the ball rolling. He started in with a typical chat up line. He was the sort of guy that Lucy didn't really like, a bit like Mike's rugby friends, but in this situation she was happy to have someone like that to break the ice. She wanted to reply, but couldn't think of anything to say. Not so Emma, she was right into the banter. Before Lucy knew it, they were all introducing themselves, well, Emma and the pushy one were taking care of that. James was the name of the handsome one. What a lovely name. Feeling a bit embarrassed she said hello. Before she knew what was going on, she was chatting with James about the lunches they laid on at the bar they were in. It all felt so natural. He was so easy to talk to. Vicky made sure that James knew she was single, and it appeared that his friend, Dave, made sure she knew that James was single, too. It almost felt like it was all happening in a dream for Lucy. She had never felt like that before. She pictured herself in James's arms. She could almost feel the touch of his lips on her cheek. Totally flustered, she couldn't even speak. Somehow or other, the two groups of friends arranged to meet

back there the next week, and she soon found herself walking down the road with Vicky and Emma. With her friends she could always open up.

‘My goodness, James is just such a nice man. Handsome, and so softly spoken. I really like him.’

‘Lucy, you have to speak more.’ Vicky admonished her. ‘Why didn’t you let him know you were interested?’

Emma jumped in, and defended Lucy.

‘Leave her alone, Vicky, you and Dave pretty much organised things for the two of them anyway.’

‘With your help, Emma. You are the one who invited them back next week.’

Emma and Vicky laughed, together. They were obviously pleased with the way it had all gone. They were always worried about their dear friend. A little push in the right direction would never go astray. Vicky adopted a joking tone of voice.

‘So, Lucy, where will we be going next Friday? Shall we go and see a film?’

All three of them laughed at Vicky’s crack. Lucy felt so giddy. Could it be possible that she had finally met the right man for her? Is this what it feels like when you meet Mr. Right? She felt so lightheaded, she was almost floating along the road. She couldn’t wait to go to bed where she could quietly think over the evenings events. Lucy had never met anyone with whom she had felt such an attraction, such an affinity. Could it be possible that her life was finally going to change? After such a long time alone, could it be possible that she had met the right man for her?

2. Misplaced faith

The light shining through the white lace curtains illuminated the photo of Jean, sitting on the bed stand. A photo of long ago, from good times, innocent times. Jean's smile always brought happiness into Claire's cold, dead heart. It was a smile of optimism, of good things to come. A smile of hope. A smile from a time when good things were expected, and life's prospects were full of wonder. How could life have changed so much? How was it possible that everything after that smile would turn so horribly wrong? Claire knew that it wasn't fair to blame Lucy for what her father had done. What was that expression? The sins of our fathers? However every time she saw her, it brought all the memories flooding back. She played the role of the aunt as well as she could, if not quite the doting aunt, at least she forced herself to be some sort of a presence in Lucy's life. Albeit, a minimum one. She just couldn't do anymore. It was too much for her. Too many memories, too much pain. As usual when she knew that Lucy was going to pay her a visit, she had set up her position out in the garden. All the tools were strewn around, and, with the gardening clothes she wore, she hoped that the general air was that of a person who was busy working away in her garden, as usual. Lucy seemed to buy into the act. It all made it a lot easier for her to get through Lucy's visits. It was a way to keep their dialogue to a minimum, and more importantly, a way for Claire to not have to sit there constantly seeing Lucy's father's face staring back at her. From her bedroom window she had a good view of the approach road, and the driveway into her house. As usual as soon as she would see Lucy's car approaching, she would rush out into the garden, and assume her position. Gardening, her great passion, or so the cover story went anyway. In reality it was hard to always find something to do out there. Anyway, Lucy would find her pottering away in her garden, as she always did, as she had come to accept as the norm. Claire looked at her watch. It was early. As usual she had prepared things far too early, but that was her way. Lucy was always very punctual, but it was better to be safe than sorry. With a sigh, Claire went through to the kitchen, and poured herself another gin with just a dash of tonic water. She would need a few of them to get through the afternoon. Gin in hand, she returned to the bedroom, and sat back down in her waiting position. Lucy's visits always brought the memories flooding back, not that they were ever far from the surface. She could remember it all with such clarity, even though so many years had gone by. A secret bottled up inside her, killing her slowly. With hindsight she knew that it would have been better to have told someone what had happened, probably even Jean herself, but at the time she hadn't known how to cope with it all, the fear, and the shame, and with the passage of time it had eventually just seemed too late to talk about it. And

anyway, with who would she talk about it, after Jean had died?

Claire had always been very close to Jean, her only sister, so she had thought nothing unusual about the phone call that evening, from her husband, Albert. A phone call that would change everything, forever. She could even remember the lightness with which she picked up the receiver.

‘Sorry to bother you, Claire, have I caught you at a bad time?’

Albert’s voice was his usual chipper self. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Actually it was nice to hear from him. She was wanting an update on Lucy’s condition. Little did she realise where that phone call would lead her. To the gates of hell itself. And back? No, she had never made it back. That phone call had been a one way ticket.

‘Not at all. How’s Lucy? Does she still have a temperature? Poor thing, she must be suffering so much.’

‘Actually, that’s what I’m calling about. She’s still running a high temperature, and can’t sleep, so it’s all a bit of a fuss over here at the moment. Jean’s been called back into the hospital, double shift coming up I’m afraid, and I was wondering if you would be able to pop over, and give me a hand with Lucy. It’s been such a...’

‘Of course! Listen it’s no bother at all. You hold down the fort, and I will be over as soon as I can.’

‘Thanks so much, Claire, you really are the best.’

Claire, as usual, was only too happy to give a helping hand. She doted on her only niece, and as she and Warren didn’t have any children, she focused a lot of her attention on Lucy. Also, time was no problem. Warren was in the merchant navy, so, as was almost always the case, he was off somewhere on a cargo ship, carrying goods across the open seas. She threw on her shoes, and in a flash was in her car, and off to her sister’s house, only a short drive away. Claire had been terribly worried about Lucy, it must have been so hard on her at only ten years old to have to suffer such a bad case of the flu, with such a very high temperature. At that age it probably felt like the end of the world. When you get older you know that those moments will eventually pass, but at her age it probably seemed so devastating. Poor little thing. Within minutes she was at Jean and Alberts’ house, and she could see Albert waiting for her out on the front steps. Poor fellow, he was no doubt beside himself, what with Jean having been called back into the hospital.

‘Hi Albert, how’s our poor little patient going?’

‘Shhh, let’s keep our voices down. Come in Claire, I think she might have finally drifted off to sleep. I gave her some cough syrup half an hour ago, and it’s effects might have finally kicked in.’

‘Oh, that’s good news!’

In a quiet voice Albert ushered Claire through to the lounge room.

‘Come on in, I’m sorry that I called you now, it seems like the panic is over. I guess I should have waited a bit longer.’

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