

**PROLOGUE**

This is the way the world ended? Well, no, not really. The world continued just as it always had. The only difference was that the human world ended. Almost. There was a very human centred perspective about the world, and that was only natural. A human world. The world made and developed by humans. A social world, full of connections, one with another. A world where few people wanted or needed to be isolated, where the very thought of isolation was almost a swear word, where those who appreciated privacy and insisted on it were looked on with grave suspicion. Television, internet, international travel on a massive scale, the printed media ready to tell them all what and how to think, there was so much that brought them together, that when it collapsed, the collapse was virtually total. And rapid. Perhaps it was deserved. A world that can demand, and get, a man's credit card number, his religious beliefs, even his state of health before he is permitted to travel from one specified place to a specified other, may not really be fit to continue. It's hard to say. Some would have it that way, on the grounds of control. As long as they are the ones doing the controlling, presumably.

However it may be, it was a fact that there came a breakdown in the norms of society, through the simple process of a rapid dying out of those who made up that society. The cause was unclear. The result was horrifying. The few who were left faced what may have been mankind's biggest challenge in the history of the species.

**BARRY**

The first time Barry Spender saw Janet she looked to be only fifteen which was odd, because she was actually some two years younger.

It was Barry's first job as a teacher, having left university a year before. Wanting a break from what he called academia, he had led a fairly free and easy life between university and teaching, working at a variety of short term jobs. Some were in shops, serving behind the counter, or stacking shelves in the store room, others included door to door selling, at which he proved to be abysmal, and serving fast food in a well known national chain of cheap restaurants, which suited him rather better, but paid rather less than his needs warranted. There were other jobs, all of which gave him experiences that either made him thoughtful, or furious, but which he thoroughly enjoyed, each in their own way. After this year, he did what he had always intended to do, and started teaching in a sizeable comprehensive school. He should, he

considered later, have stuck with door to door salesmanship. It may not have paid so well, but it was a lot easier.

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It was quiet in the breakfast room, as quiet as it had been all week. Barry Spender sat at a table, eating cereal and toast, a task that he accomplished mechanically, lost as he was in his thoughts. His was the figure that passed unnoticed in the streets, a mister average if ever there was one, to judge by appearances, average height and build, average sort of age that was difficult to make an accurate guess at, but apparently on the wrong side of thirty, maybe even of forty. It was hard to tell. Life had not treated him well. Not badly, as some reckon their lot in life, but not well. He was undisturbed, but not for long. A light shadow fell across him.

'Excuse me. Is this seat free?'

The voice brought him back to the present. He glanced at the other tables, all empty, but nodded assent, and a slim figure sat down opposite, looking at him with amusement.

'It's Mr. Spender, isn't it? You don't remember me, do you?'

He looked more closely, tendrils of recollection stirring hesitantly in his mind. He had seen her come in the night previous, when he was relaxing in the sitting room of the guest house where he had arrived about an hour before, but that wasn't it. He wasn't exactly a stranger in the town, but he was no regular visitor, and knew only one or two people as passing acquaintances. Truth to tell, he knew very few people at all. His lifestyle didn't exactly lend itself to close friendships.

'I'm sorry. I seem to know you from somewhere, but I'm afraid you have the advantage.'

She smiled in a friendly, encouraging way. 'I do, don't I? Well, it's not too surprising, really. It must be over ten years since we last met. I've grown a bit since then. Got older, anyway. Still nothing?'

He shook his head slowly. 'Sorry,' he said again. 'You look like the sort of person it would be no hardship to know, if you don't mind my saying, but there's still a blank.'

'You used to teach me.'

Recognition flooded in. 'Good lord, now I've got you. Janet. Janet Woods. I can't say I would have known you anywhere, as though that wasn't obvious, but it's been a long time, as you say. What are you doing here? On holiday?'

'I might ask you the same question, but I'll answer yours first. On holiday yes. My annual trip to the countryside, if you can call a city the countryside. It always feels like it to me. I like it here. It's nice to walk along the walls and look at the river,

see the old city buildings and so on. Now your turn. I thought you went to the other end of the country. In fact, I know you did. So what brings you back?’

‘Well, like you, I’m on holiday. I’ve only just arrived, or to be more exact, I arrived last night. This is a favourite place of mine to buy books, and just to visit.’

‘Yes, I saw you come in. I thought I knew you then, but wasn’t actually certain until this morning. I hope you don’t mind my approach, but I couldn’t just ignore you.’

‘Not at all. I’m rather glad you did.’

‘Are you on your own, or is your wife with you?’

The man’s happy smile faded. ‘No, no wife. I’m on my own now.’

She looked at him, disturbed by what she saw in his face.

‘I see. Or rather, I don’t see. Is it something I shouldn’t ask about?’

He sighed. ‘Well, it’s no great secret. Call me divorced, and leave it at that. These things happen.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, and meant it.

‘Well, tell me about yourself,’ he said. ‘What have you been doing since I last saw you?’

‘Oh, this and that. Working, travelling when I can afford it, which isn’t as often as I would like. Nothing very exciting. In spite of your efforts to teach me I don’t think I learned so much, so I do the jobs I can get.’

He looked amused. ‘I wasn’t your only teacher,’ he said. ‘Don’t lay all the blame on me.’

‘Oh, you’re not to blame, no more than anybody else. I’m no genius, I know that. I’ve got the sort of work that suits what I can do, and I don’t complain about that.’

He glanced at her left hand. ‘Not married?’

She shook her head. ‘No, not now. I was divorced some years ago.’

‘Oops. That wasn’t a very tactful question. My apologies.’

‘It doesn’t matter. It was a long time ago and I don’t mind talking about it. As you said, these things happen. It’s common enough. But to change the subject, how long are you staying?’

‘Just a week,’ he said. ‘I go back next Sunday.’

The landlady came in to the room and bustled about, clearing the tables. Taking the tactful hint, the two guests rose and made their way to the sitting room, where they continued their conversation, only partly filled with “do you remembers” and “what happened to...” Ten o’ clock came and went.

‘Do you have anything planned for today?’ Janet asked. ‘Anything interesting?’

‘Nothing special, no. I thought I might go to listen to the concert in the park this afternoon, but other than that, I’m having a lazy day, more or less resting after

travelling yesterday. I came by bus which is comfortable enough, but it's still tiring on a long journey. Also, to be honest, I don't have too much to spend, and I'll have to be careful with my purchases. That's the trouble with holidays. I always spend more than I can afford. What about you?

She put her head on one side before answering. 'As it happens, I'm going to that concert myself. Would you like a bit of company, or do you prefer being on your own?'

'I'd be delighted if you joined me,' he said, in a warm tone of voice. 'I've no objection to being on my own, but it's not every day a man of my age can be seen with an attractive young woman. I'd be an idiot to turn down the opportunity, wouldn't I?'

Janet blushed, and she cast her eyes down momentarily. 'Thank you for the compliment,' she said. 'I'm not sure it's true, but it's nice to hear, just the same. In fact, if you're going to talk like that, I'll spend the entire day with you.'

'Are you sure you'll be safe?' he mocked.

She wrinkled her nose at him. 'Yes, I'm sure. I know what you were like years ago, and it's doubtful if you've changed since then. Not unless it's a change for the better.'

'You're quite complimentary yourself. Well, if you wish to waste your time with an old man, I'll be ready to leave in ten minutes or so if that suits you. We could have lunch together before the concert, if you like.'

'Yes, I would like that,' she said. 'The only thing is, I'm paying my own expenses.'

'Ah, now there you have me. It would be gentlemanly to at least offer, but regrettably I lack the means to act in as gentleman like fashion as I would wish, which is a rather complicated way of saying I'm short of money, and that at the beginning of the holiday. All right, with that condition in mind, I'll go and get ready. I'll wait for you here when I come back down again.'

It was less than ten minutes later that they left the building, turned right and walked slowly towards the river where there were a variety of restaurants and cafes.

'Mr. Spender...', Janet started.

'Barry,' he said firmly. 'My name is Barry. If we are going to be spending the day together, you had better get rid of the formality and forget I was ever your teacher, or I'll be obliged to keep you in detention at the end of the day.'

Janet rolled her eyes at him in mock fear.

'Oh dear,' she said. 'And I thought I was going to be safe with you.'

'Only if you stop calling me Mr. Spender.'

'Very well then, Barry. Oh, now I've forgotten what I was going to say. Now I remember. Do you come here often? Oh dear,' she blushed. 'That sounds like an awful chat up line.'

'I don't mind being chatted up,' he said, eyes twinkling. 'It doesn't happen very often. Truth to tell, I do believe this is the first time ever, more's the pity. But to answer your question, yes, I come here almost every year. It's changed quite a lot in the past twelve months though, enough to make it almost unrecognisable in some areas. Still, maybe some things stay the same. There used to be a decent little cafe at the end of this street. If it still exists, we might take lunch there. Or do you have any preferences?'

'No,' she answered. 'None at all. I guess one place is as good as any other.'

After eating they sat for a while over coffee, talking lightly, enjoying the warm sunshine streaming in through the window, enjoying the social contact that both of them unconsciously craved. Janet felt a twinge of disturbance when she saw Barry's order, a plain omelette. Looking at him she wondered if he ate enough. He seemed thinner and more drawn than she remembered, but that may have just been her fancy. Nor did he take anything but coffee afterwards, explaining that he didn't really care for sweet things. Just the same, it was noticeable how much sugar he put into his cup. Her own meal, though satisfying, was simple enough, yet Barry's bill was little more than half of hers.

After eating, they continued to the park, sitting on folding chairs near to the bandstand, where the afternoon's concert was given by a very competent set of musicians.

'Do you still like this sort of stuff?' asked Barry. 'Or do your tastes run to something a bit more modern nowadays.'

'Oh, I can listen to that as well,' answered Janet, 'but I have a strong preference for this type. I got it from you as a matter of fact.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' said Barry. 'I taught music rather badly as far as I can remember.'

'You didn't, you know. School is where I learned to like good music. I got a taste of it then, and enjoyed it so much I searched for more of the same kind. It all started with you, though. After all, you did teach me the clarinet.'

'Well, it's nice to hear I had some influence. That's something that teachers don't normally find out about. We never quite know what a pupil has taken in.'

'You influenced me all right,' said Janet thoughtfully. 'You influenced me more than you may think.'

After the concert it was pleasant to wander through the old part of the town, soaking in the atmosphere of a long gone age where quiet reflection was valued more

than in the modern world. Evening came. Janet and Barry made their way to their boarding house. They stayed for a while in the sitting room over the tea and biscuits provided by their landlady.

'It's been a lovely day,' said Barry. 'Thank you for your company.'

'Thank you for letting me come with you,' said Janet. 'I enjoyed it.'

'Believe me, the pleasure is all mine. In fact, it would be rather nice to repeat the experience tomorrow, if you are willing. But no, forgive me, forget I said that. You must have plans of your own, or friends you wish to see. I mustn't be selfish.'

'On the contrary, Barry, I would love to come with you, for the whole week if you like and if you can put up with me.'

Barry flushed with pleasure. 'Well, if you are sure.'

'Yes, I am. I have no special plans for the week, except to enjoy it. It's such a change from my work, you see. I have a part time job on a check out in a big supermarket. It's boring and noisy, and when I get home, all I want to do is sit in silence. That's why I like it here. There's always something to do, but it's possible to find quiet places where you can hear something else than the eternal beeping of the cash machines and the same empty music playing twenty times a day. Or is it only six times a day? I try not to listen to it, so I do lose count. The job doesn't even pay a lot, like all part time jobs, but I can manage the rent, and I eat well enough, and there's even sufficient left over to be able to go on holiday once a year.'

'But your friends...?' said Barry.

'Are non-existent. Most women of my age are married with families of their own. They don't have time, or space, for a single woman, especially a divorced woman, always a slightly suspicious character. I don't blame them. They have lives of their own to lead. We really have nothing in common.'

'No, I suppose not,' said Barry, thoughtfully. 'But not every woman your age is married. They don't even always have families, which seems to be practically compulsory, even from the age of what I might call not really old enough yet.'

'True, but they too have their own lives. Besides, my bedsitter is far too small to be able to invite anyone home. It's just the one room with a stove and sink in one corner, a single bed in another, a cupboard for dishes, a small wardrobe for my clothes, a table to eat from and a chair to sit on. That's it. I even have to share a bathroom. Not that I'm complaining. It's not much, as they say, but it is home. And it's cheap enough to run on a part time wage. I wouldn't mind moving to somewhere a bit bigger, but there really is nowhere I can afford. I was lucky to get the one I have at the rent they ask. Most people won't have it, so it comes cheaper than average. The bank keeps on offering me a house loan, but the work isn't so secure, and I really can't go into debt. Not that sort of debt anyway. One day, perhaps, things will

improve, and I can get the sort of house I've always dreamed about. Then I can invite all the friends I don't have to a housewarming party. You'll come, of course.'

'I would be delighted,' said Barry. 'Always assuming I'm in the area at the time. Where do you intend to move to?'

'Oh, I'm quite happy where I am. There are several houses in the town I could live in if I only had the money. I say town, but really I mean the village next door, although that's practically a suburb nowadays.'

'And which town is that?'

She told him. Barry stared at her in astonishment.

'How long have you been living there?' he demanded.

'About five years. Not quite as long as that perhaps. That's right. I moved in the September.'

'But that's incredible, Janet. That's where I live. Close by at least, in the town itself. We must have been practically neighbours for all this time. It's a wonder we never ran into each other before.'

She stared at him in astonishment. 'Perhaps that's because I rarely go into the town centre. The village has just about everything I need. There's only clothing missing, and I don't buy so much of that, and certainly not very often. Anyway, if you live so close, you must come and visit me when we get back.'

'Yes. Yes, I'll do that. It would be a pleasure.'

The days followed one on the top of another. Janet and Barry spent their time together, actually doing very little, and seeing very little, yet the time flowed freely. Nor did any day seem too long and drawn out. Janet's first doubts about Barry's appetite turned to real concern when she saw how little he spent on food. Not that he spent a great deal on anything else. He liked to browse through the bookshops, but she wasn't aware that he bought as much as a single book, in spite of his claims of the holiday being a book buying expedition. Yet it wasn't that he was mean. One morning he presented her with a rose, a buttonhole she wore with pleasure for the two days before the petals began to drop, afterwards pressing it in a book of her own. Barry began to drop as well by the end of the week, and found ready excuses to sit down for long periods of time. Not that Janet objected. It was all part of the peace and quiet she had come to seek. The only thing that disturbed her was Barry's obvious weakness. Her suspicions grew to a certainty, and she began to plan. Late on the Saturday she attacked him over the evening tea and biscuits.

'It's our last day together tomorrow, Barry,' she said. 'One thing I always do when I come here is to have a picnic in the park. Well, I haven't had it yet, so tomorrow it will have to be.'

Her conscience at the lies she was telling gave up without as much as a twinge as she continued.

'I've already planned one for tomorrow afternoon. You'll join me, of course.'

'That's a nice thought, Janet. What shall I bring along?'

'Nothing. Or rather, bring yourself. That's all. It's my treat, Barry. A sort of thank you for being so kind to me this week. Yes, I know you don't need thanks, but it's something I would like to do anyway. So, are you coming? I hope so, as otherwise there'll be a lot of food wasted.'

'Well, when you put it that way, what else can I say but yes? Yes please. I haven't been on a picnic for I don't know how long. It should be interesting.'

It should, thought Janet to herself grimly, be interesting to see if you can remember how to eat properly. The thought remained hidden as she smiled sweetly.

'Right then, I'll see you in the morning over breakfast.'

The picnic was an undoubted success. There were very few scraps left by the time they had eaten their fill, and these they gave to the ever hungry birds that fluttered around them, laughing at their antics. They stretched out on the grass and if eyes closed in sleep, it was a sleep that was comfortable and welcome. At length Barry woke up, to find Janet looking at him intently.

'Penny for your thoughts,' he said.

She blushed, confused and slightly embarrassed at being caught out.

'Oh, there's nothing much. I was just thinking about my marriage and how it might have turned out. It could have been very much like this, I suppose. You must be wondering about it. My divorce, I mean.'

'It's none of my business, Janet. You don't have to tell me a thing.'

'I don't mind a bit of true confession. Not to you, at least.' She hesitated. 'In fact, I'd rather like to tell you about it, if you think you could bear to listen. There is a good reason for it. For telling you, that is. Would you mind?'

'Of course not,' he said wonderingly.

'Not here. Can we go somewhere else, somewhere a bit quieter even than this?'

Picking up the picnic basket, they left the shade of the trees and wandered out into the bright sunshine, making their way to the nearby river, walking along until finding a secluded spot, well away from anybody else. The occasional train rumbled by, close to the other side of the river, small boats made their way both upstream and downstream, but they were far enough away from the city centre to be undisturbed. She sat down on the grassy bank, clasping her knees and staring out over the water. He bent and sat alongside.

'When I was younger, just a girl you understand, I had a dream that one day a knight in shining armour would take me away to his castle and look after me for the

rest of my life. Silly perhaps, but it's the sort of dream that young girls have. Or which many of them have at any rate. No, I mustn't speak for others. It was my dream, all my own. Of course I wasn't silly enough to believe it would really happen just like that. I could separate fact from story book tales. Just the same, the dream was there, even though I knew it wasn't likely to happen, or if it did, the castle would be a semi detached house somewhere in the town, and he would go off to work every morning just like everybody else. The thing is, you see, there was a knight. I mean, there was a man and I looked upon him as my knight. He never knew it. At least I don't think he knew, or if he did, he never gave any signs of being aware. Nor did I expect him to do so for a number of reasons which seemed valid at the time, and even more valid now.'

There was a long silence as a pleasure boat full of tourists went by. A muffled commentary came drifting over the water towards them. She waited until the ripples subsided before continuing.

'Well, you might guess what happened. He got married, and moved away, and never understood how I felt.'

'Didn't you tell him?'

'No. It wouldn't have done, you see. I was still at school, still under age. That was one of the valid reasons I mentioned. These things happen. I was simply born too late. He was a good bit older, and was working already. Another valid reason. Also, I didn't want to see him get into trouble because of me.'

She gave him a sidelong glance, a hint of mischief on her face. Her eyes gleamed as she spoke.

'At least, not the sort of trouble that might have come from the thoughts I was having about him.'

'Which were?' he asked, catching her mood.

'Oh, highly unsuitable for a girl who hadn't reached the age of legal consent. He could have gone to prison for that, you know, and I didn't like the idea at all. I don't suppose he would have done, either.'

'It's a high price to pay for a bit of pleasure,' said Barry. 'Or even a great deal of pleasure for that matter. So he married someone else, and you never saw him again.'

'As a matter of fact, I did. Once. Just once I saw him, even spoke to him, as I was leaving work one day, not long after I left school, and before I moved down south. It wasn't exactly a long conversation, and it never went beyond the every day topics, but I knew then, as if I hadn't known it before, that I really did love him. Silly, isn't it, a thirteen year old developing such strong feelings which last and last? They really did, you know. Of course, a thirteen year old isn't supposed to have those sort of feelings, but I had them just the same. It wasn't simply a romantic dream, and it wasn't only

personal biology at work either, although I'll admit there was plenty of that as well, even more at the time I met him again. That was when I was seventeen and in rather better control of my mind if not of my hormones. But there never really was anyone else.'

Silence.

'Go on, say it, I know you must be thinking it,' she said.

'Say what, Janet?'

'That there was someone else. I got married after all. It was the wrong man, as it turned out, but I married him anyway. So much for high ideals. That was a mistake, of course, though I did try to make it a success. You may think I was being unfair to him, and maybe I was, but I really did try. The trouble was, he was too immature and couldn't, or wouldn't take responsibility. I was only young myself, and hadn't realised just how childish he was. I'm sorry, I must be boring you. I can see you have problems of your own.'

Barry shook his head. 'I guess everyone has problems, Janet, but I'm not bored. I don't suppose you have the chance to talk about it very often. Go ahead. I'll listen, if you want to tell me more. I'm not a bad listener. It's easier than talking. I guess I don't have too much practice at that. Comes of living on my own, I expect.'

She smiled at him gratefully and continued, staring out across the river with unfocussed eyes.

'There's not a lot more to tell. We weren't married for so long, a few months only, less than half a year in fact. He left me the day I told him I was pregnant. He didn't go immediately, he beat me first, claiming I'd been with other men. It wasn't true, he was my first and only, but it must have seemed like a good excuse. The odd part was that he always preferred to go drinking with his mates than spend time with me, and I know he picked up other women in the pubs, though what he did with them is a bit of a mystery.'

She blushed. 'I mean, I may not have so much experience myself, but I do know what a man might do with a woman, of course. It's just that he didn't seem to be so aware himself, at least not with me.'

The man's face was stony as he listened.

'I was in hospital for treatment for a week. Apparently nothing very much, just cuts and bruises and a broken finger or two. I lost the baby though. That was painful. I don't mean just the physical pain, though there was that as well, quite a lot of it, more than I would care to go through again. No, it was the thought that there was part of me gone for ever. Then it turned out that my injuries were more than just cuts and bruises, and that I couldn't have children at all, not any more. Not that it

matters, because we got divorced and I've lived on my own ever since. What I have now is only a tiny bedsitter, but it's what I can afford, and it's home.'

Barry opened his mouth to speak, but Janet forestalled him.

'There's more,' she said. 'If you can bear to listen to problems I should have forgotten long ago.'

'Go on', he said gently.

'It's a long time now, yet I can remember every detail perfectly. I wish I couldn't.' She gave a short, humourless laugh. 'I was just remembering my wedding night. Don't worry, it's clean. Believe me it's clean. Traditionally, that's the time that a woman loses her virginity, presuming she hasn't done so already. I hadn't, if you can believe me, and I was waiting with, shall we say, anticipation. Only natural, of course. Hormones again. In the event, I waited in vain on that night and for a good many nights after. He was so drunk, he fell asleep on the sofa, so I spent my wedding night sleeping on my own. I don't suppose many women do that, but I did. I knew he was fond of a drink, but he was well practised at hiding the fact, and I hadn't realised he took the stuff to such excess. He was half drunk during the ceremony, and completed the job at the reception, so that he hardly knew what he was doing. Or in this case, not doing. Not only that, it was almost a month before he did, and he was drunk again then. It wasn't quite the way I had thought it would be.'

'It makes you wonder why he ever got married,' said Barry.

'Doesn't it? Well, it wasn't for a regular sex life, that's for certain. At least, not with me. I'm not sure he did with anyone, even though he was in the habit of picking up women in the pubs, although I didn't find that out until long afterwards. I thought, after that first time, things might improve, but they didn't. It took him a couple of months before he came to me again, though he wasn't quite as drunk as he was the first time. After that... well, there was no after that, because the second time proved to be the last time. I fell pregnant, and he beat it out of me. He claimed that a woman couldn't get pregnant the first time, so it proved I'd been sleeping around. He couldn't remember it was actually the second time. He'd forgotten the first. He never knew what he'd done. In a way, I wasn't so sorry. There was nothing gentle about him. I couldn't honestly call it rape, but it certainly felt something like that.'

'That's truly awful, Janet. I don't know what to say.'

'There's nothing you need to say. You've helped more than you can know just by listening. I've never told anyone else about it, not even in the hospital where I was treated. Perhaps I should have done. Of course, I should have waited for my knight to come back, or since he never did, and as far as I knew, he never would, I should have settled for being a spinster for the rest of my life, instead of getting married because it seemed to be the thing to do. Another kind of second best, you understand, but

better than the one I chose. It may have been easier in the long run. Less painful, anyway. Not that it matters now. It was all a long time ago.'

She bent her knees under her and turned to look at him, searching his face with an enquiring expression.

'I suppose you've guessed,' she said hesitantly, 'who my knight was?'

'No,' he said, shaking his head slowly. 'I don't believe I have, although I haven't really given it any thought.'

She smiled. 'He was the kindest man I ever knew. Patient and kind and always ready to listen and explain things. The only thing he ever did against my will was to get married and move away. Not that I grudged him the happiness he got from that. If he was happy, then I was happy. I don't suppose people believe in unselfish love any more, but that's what it was, just the same. There's more than one way to be happy with a man, even when you are not with him in practice, if you understand what I mean.' She hesitated again. 'It's yourself, of course.'

'Me?' he exclaimed with surprise.

'Who else? Well, the fact you didn't guess shows how modest you are. But that's why I could never tell you. As my teacher, I rather think you would have been in deep trouble if anyone had suspected.'

'I'll say,' he said with feeling. 'You know, if you had told me at the time, I would have been obliged to pass on the information officially. At the very least I would have been moved to another school, or even pressured to resign if it had been suspected there was anything in it.'

'I guessed as much. I was a bit young to understand all the implications at the time, but I certainly understood that one. Then, of course, by the time I left school, you were married and beyond my reach. It was just as well, because if you hadn't been married, I really think I would have told you how I felt, sooner or later. I think it would have been sooner, and that, I now realise, would probably have been a mistake.'

'Well, a man can't help feeling complimented when a pretty girl tells him she fancies him, but you're right, it would certainly have been a mistake then. Men of my age do not get involved with girls of sixteen, not if they have any sense, not if the girl has been that man's pupil at school, and certainly not if she has been having thoughts about him many years ahead of her age. It does happen, I know, but it never seems to work.'

'I know it. Twelve years age difference is too much when the girl has only just left school. It is about twelve years, isn't it? Of course, that difference disappears when getting older.'

'Whoever taught you maths clearly didn't make a very good job of it.'

She laughed. 'Don't be silly. I'm sure you know what I mean. The gap between us now is much closer than it used to be in any important sense. Nobody would think twice about it. You could hardly be accused of baby snatching. Not now.'

He gave her a long, hard look, trying without much success to see what lay under the placid, contented face she displayed.

'What are you saying, Janet?'

'I love you, Barry. I always have. If you were still married, I wouldn't tell you about my love, but under the circumstances, it's as well you should know. Actually, I'm being a wee bit selfish in mentioning it now. Of course, if you were still married, it's not likely we would have spent this week together in the way we have. I'm not a husband snatcher, and somehow I can't see you as someone who is ready for a bit on the side. As it is, well, to put it bluntly, I would come and live with you if you would have me.'

Barry chuckled softly, shaking his head with slow movements.

'A rude suggestion. My dear Janet, it's not every day a man gets an offer like that, and I don't say the idea isn't an attractive one in principle. You always were a nice girl, and you've clearly developed into a nice woman, but apart from our age difference, which isn't as much as you thought but which still remains at a not too uncomfortable ten years, you've caught me at the wrong end of my life. I don't even know how seriously I should take you.'

'Very seriously,' she said. 'Take it for granted that I mean every word I say. It's what I wanted to tell you when I was seventeen, that day we met on the street. I had this dream, you see, a sort of fantasy, about inviting you to my flat, because I was living on my own even then. It was supposed to be just for tea, but I didn't even try to pretend to myself that you wouldn't be urged you to stay the night. Well, I couldn't do it at the time, but I can now. It must all sound a bit sudden, but I haven't had a lot of pleasure in my life and I'm not letting this opportunity pass by without at least trying to take advantage of it. Maybe I'm being selfish as I said. Of course, if your experiences of marriage have put you off women, I would understand that. You have only to say so, and that would be the end of the matter. I can hardly force you, after all. It's a way out you see, if you want to take it.'

'No, it's not that,' he answered. 'I was divorced some time ago, and while it wasn't exactly a satisfactory marriage, it didn't put me off, not in that way, although I have to admit any further experiences with women have been firmly in the field of my own fantasies. Look, let me tell you about it. She was a professional singer, rising fairly rapidly to the top. Her style of music wasn't mine, it was more the popular type. Wailing American adenoidal is how I always thought of it, although I never told her

so, of course. You know the type. Empty, meaningless, supermarket wallpaper music, designed to take away from the customer what little powers of reason they have.'

'I'll say,' said Janet, with feeling. 'Carry on.'

'Our careers went in different directions. Perhaps because of that, she met more exciting people than myself, which wouldn't be difficult, and eventually ran off with one of them. What happened to her after that I have little idea. I know she remarried, after having a baby, so she presumably felt able to give something of herself to somebody. Certainly I was never on the receiving end. I don't think she really loved me at all.'

'Poor Barry,' said Janet, stroking his hand gently. 'You don't seem to have had any better luck than I had.'

'Hardly. At least, I wasn't beaten physically. In other ways, it was less than satisfactory. I wouldn't say she was unresponsive, but every time I went near her, she found something else to do somewhere else.'

'Not in the beginning, surely?'

'Yes, even in the beginning. Oh, I'm not claiming that she always found something else to do, but it wasn't very often, and it got steadily worse as time passed by. I even asked her once why she bothered getting married at all, but she never gave me a satisfactory answer. I don't think she knew, herself. I didn't even try to keep her, thinking that if that was what she wanted, I wasn't entitled to stand in her way. Weak of me, of course, but that's the way I am. Anyway, I couldn't force her. That's no answer either.'

'Frigid?'

'I don't think so. I never actually found out. At least we had no children, which was a blessing. She didn't want to interrupt her career for that. But to return to us, if circumstances were different I might even be tempted. There happens to be a practical aspect to the matter, one you couldn't know about. It may seem that I'm reasonably well off in spite of my apparent poverty of this week, but that's a poverty which is not just apparent but real. It's not that I'm lazy, but work comes when it comes. A musician's life is rather precarious.'

'Aren't you teaching?' asked Janet.

'No, not now. Or rather, I do teach, but not in schools, which must be a great relief to the education authority. I take pupils privately for piano lessons, give the occasional recital, act as a relief organist in several churches and so on. It's not regular, you see. Apart from my mortgage, which isn't especially high now, and is less than I would have to pay in rent, I have no debts and I do have enough to live on for the moment, but that's as far as it goes. I have no car. I can't afford it. My diet is adequate but simple in the extreme. I can't afford anything else. This is likely to be

my last visit here for some time. I couldn't really afford this either, although I saved for it for a whole year. As always, the holiday proved to be more expensive than I had expected - hoped, I should say, in spite of repeated experience - which means even greater economies when I get back home again, though it's hard to say how. Don't worry, I won't starve, but it simply isn't true that two can live as cheaply as one. I know what food costs, for example, and there isn't enough cash for anything extra, nor does there seem to be the remotest possibility of getting any more, though doubtless something will turn up. If inflation rises, and it shows every sign of doing so, the race between the graveyard and the end of my money becomes uncomfortably fast. It doesn't worry me, but I am aware of the fact.'

A picture of Barry's omelette he had eaten at their first lunch together swam into Janet's mind. His meals during the rest of the week had scarcely been any more substantial. She knew beyond a shadow of doubt that his claim to have an adequate diet was sheer nonsense. The amount he had eaten of the picnic she had provided was ample proof of that.

'I have money,' she said simply. 'It's yours. Whether you take me or not.'

'I'm not taking it, of course, and that's not out of any sense of misplaced pride, that being another thing I can ill afford, rather because you need all of that yourself, but it would be interesting to know how much you have in mind.'

She mentioned a figure which made his eyebrows raise. Swiftly, he made a calculation.

'Bless you, Janet, I always knew you were a lovely girl. I appreciate the offer, and if I could take it, you would have to accompany it. However, I don't want you to run away with the ideas that I'm starving, or on the point of joining the cardboard box city. Things aren't as bad as all that. I do have enough, honestly, it's just that at the moment, work has proved difficult to find. I may even have to go back to school teaching, although I'm a dead loss there. Still, it may be an option if I can con anyone into believing I'm competent. Anyway, this conversation is getting far too serious. Perhaps we should move on.'

He stood up, brushing the loose grass from his clothing. Janet smiled at him, stretching out her hands to his. He grasped them and pulled her to her feet, holding her firmly as she stumbled on the uneven ground and fell towards him. Her face lifted, eyes glistening with unshed tears. Eager lips sought their target and pressed close, tongues flickering in an ecstasy of pent up passion. To her delight, her kisses were reciprocated with interest and hands wandered firmly over her compliant body. Slowly they sank back to the ground again, the frustrations of the years being steadily released in close and warm contact. The sound of an approaching motor launch

brought them back to reality, and they separated with difficulty, adjusting clothing to a more respectable level, laughing like a couple of teenagers.

'How long is it since you last kissed a woman, Barry?' Janet asked.

He considered. 'I don't know. Not since my divorce. Earlier than that, come to think of it. A lot earlier.'

'Poor Barry,' Janet said. 'You don't get much fun out of life, do you?'

She took his hand and led it back to her bare knee, where it had so recently rested, trapping the fingers with her other knee. He looked with interest at her little finger, which was slightly twisted and bent.

'So far, and no further,' she said primly. 'At least not in public. Later perhaps, when there is no-one around to see. And you can forget the perhaps. That's a promise.'

'Janet, are you sure about this?'

'I'm sure. I've waited a long time for you. I can't force you to take me with you when you return home, but I want you to know that I will always be here. Whenever you want me, I will be ready. Wherever you are I want you to know that there is one person in the world who loves you.'

'I'm a fool to turn it down, aren't I?'

'When it's so freely offered, perhaps you are, at least on the grounds of money,' she said in a practical tone of voice, watching as the boat disappeared round a bend. 'I'm sure we could think of something. I have a job myself after all.'

'I have thought already. I'm thinking long and hard all the time, but the arithmetic is inescapable. Your income can't be high, and even with that, we would be struggling. Even at best I only make a bare living, and it's precarious at any time, otherwise I might be tempted to make you a rude offer of my own.'

She smoothed her skirt over her knees. 'If you ever do, you may be sure that I would take it up.'

'I'll let you know, but it's not likely. My income is actually falling, and it isn't easy to find any other work, not at my age. You know that. You live in the same area. There are too many people out of work already.'

She sighed. 'Oh dear, it's difficult, isn't it?'

'Impossible might be the word you are searching for. We seem to have found each other too late. I'm truly sorry, Janet. Whatever your promises about making use of privacy later on, they can never come to anything. I'm rather sorry about that as well. It's a long time since anyone cared so much about me. I don't just want an affair. It has to be the real thing. I would guess you feel the same way about it.'

She regarded him steadily. 'Up to a point. I have no objections to an affair if we can't manage anything more permanent.'

'That would mean visiting each other at odd times, creeping in, a quick thrash and creeping out again in the hope that nobody knows what we were up to. It's all right for a man, Janet, but even these days, it's still the woman who gets the rotten reputation. I'm sure you don't want that. I wouldn't like to think I'd inflicted that upon you just to satisfy some of my baser instincts.'

'No, I suppose not,' said Janet. 'Even if it satisfied some of my own base instincts which are badly in need of some satisfying, believe me, especially after this week, but... oh bother, there's somebody coming.'

Somebody there was, a small party of youth who sat a few paces away, and unpacked fishing gear. By mutual consent, Janet and her companion stood up and walked slowly back along the tow path, hand in hand, relishing the contact. 'Do you still play the clarinet?' asked Barry.

Janet flushed. 'No, not now.'

'You had quite a talent for it, you know. It seems a pity.'

'I no longer have the instrument,' she said in a low voice. 'The day my husband beat me, that was one of the things he used. He broke it against my back. I saw you looking at my little finger, the one that got broken and is still bent. Well, I have marks on my back made by the metalwork of a clarinet. I'll show them to you one day, whether we have an affair or not, and that's a promise.'

Barry looked shocked and conversation dwindled a little, but the silences were comfortable.

It was less comfortable at the railway station, where Janet's train home was almost due.

'If I knock at your door,' she said, 'can I expect an answer?'

Barry smiled at her fondly. 'Yes, of course. I hope we can be friends at least. It will be nice to have a bit of company. I don't get much.'

'What time is your bus?' she asked.

'Seven thirty this evening. Still a few hours to go.'

'Don't bother waiting,' she said. 'If we can't be together, make it as painless as possible.'

'I'll wait,' he replied. 'It's no pain to do that. Can I get you a magazine or something before you go?'

'Don't waste your money. You don't have so much.'

He smiled. 'I'm not so destitute.'

'All right then, but no magazine, just a newspaper.'

Inside the shop Barry counted out his remaining coins carefully. As he had said, there were a few pounds left. He paid for the newspaper Janet chose and passed it over to her. She tucked it carefully into her shoulder bag, slipped her hand through

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