

To Life

It started as a joke in the op-shop, browsing preloved iridescent trousers and unwanted lime-green coats.

It was one of those easy summer days at year's end when the clouds idly ride the breeze. They were childhood friends, had gone through every stage together. Now, twenty-two with degrees in drama and accountancy, the next stage was uncertain – but this was their summer. They always had summer.

“Hey!” He beckoned to her, wide-brimmed hat spilling cherry blossoms over his face. “What do you think our mums would say if you wore this to the neighbourhood barbecue?”

He pointed at the display cabinet. Inside was a ring, a massive fake cerulean stone surrounded by diamantes. It was one of the tackiest things she'd ever seen. She burst out laughing.

Although their summer was removed from time, their parents were already thinking ahead, passing on phone numbers of best friends' colleagues, buying them the kind of shirts that had to be ironed. His mother had started saying how she could do with a good wedding and a few grandchildren. Hers had been picking out eligible bachelors from regional businesses – the most stable, the most local, the most lacklustre. She'd started calling her Yenta behind her back.

She pressed the palm of her hand against her heart, fluttered her eyelashes, and started to sing: “Matchmaker, Matchmaker, make me a match.”

The ring was cheap. He bought it.

As they walked to the park they planned her entrance to the barbecue: down the stairs in a yellow ball dress and jangles to old musical theme tunes, him waiting in a dinner jacket with a can of beer in one hand and sausage in the other. Their mothers swooning into the pool, to be rescued by their fathers.

They sat on the grass in the park. The bees hummed in the clover and she kicked off her shoes. He gave her the ring, wrapped in tissue paper, and she slipped it into her pocket.

“You should have bought the hat too,” she said. They laughed in the sun, shorts and bare feet and summer, with the whole horizon open to a boundless blue sky.

They’d forgotten about it by the time the barbeque came around.

She was mad that day. On a trip to the dentist, her mother had invited the receptionist who was, apparently, young and handsome and single. Her parents here hosting, so she couldn’t not show up in protest.

She stomped down the stairs, thrusting her hands into her pockets. She frowned when she found something there. It was the ring.

Her mother’s merry laughter drifted inside. She unwrapped the ring and shoved it onto her finger.

He was standing alone. He lifted his beer when he saw her, shrugged when he read her bad mood. In reply she held up her left hand and raised her eyebrows. He understood almost straight away – but in that fraction of a second before he did, it was surprise on his face. Alarm. She wanted to stop it.

But it was too late. He crossed the deck and draped an arm over her shoulder, drew her body slightly into his.

Her mother saw from across the lawn and gasped, gripping her father's arm. Then everyone was looking at her, at them. The bottom dropped out of her stomach and her heart fell through, nothing to hold onto, just falling.

He spoke for them, said something appropriate to her parents, his parents, all the neighbours. He squeezed her shoulder. Although he'd done that before it felt different now, hot and cold like a fever. He said something and beamed, so she beamed too.

And that was their first kiss, right there: a perfunctory performance for an audience of family and neighbours ranging in age from eight months to eighty, everyone's faces overjoyed. His lips were warm and soft and strange. She smiled, accepting congratulations, feeling numb underneath his arm as they were bounced from person to person like a pinball.

She looked at him sideways. She didn't know what he was thinking, couldn't read what was underneath the act. She'd always known before.

They planned her wedding, everyone but her. Their mothers took over.

At no point did she ask him, When do we stop this? She wanted to ask what was happening and why. He didn't ask it, and she couldn't. The words stuck in her throat.

The first time they slept together was their wedding night. She'd had boyfriends before, unfamiliar boys who were exciting for that unfamiliarity. But this boy she knew already, too well. Getting to know his body was not something she wanted. He shouldn't be, he's not, she told herself, a lover.

And then, between the sheets, afterwards, he asked her.

“What have we done?”

She realised maybe he'd been the same, swept up in everyone's excitement and too frightened to ask what was going on. Not sure what she was feeling or thinking, what it all really meant.

They lay there together, heads on opposite pillows, staring at the ceiling. She took his hand. It was like when they'd been scared as children, scared in the dark after telling urban legends and a strange noise rattled the windows.

He found a job in real estate, filling the financial gaps actors always have, and she started at an accountancy firm. They opened a savings account and made plans for holidays and, longer term, a house.

They worked diligently and set grown-up goals. They hosted dinner parties and went to pubs. He got some gigs in the comedy festival. She got a promotion. Months went by like clouds in a strong breeze, morphing from one intangible shape to the next. They turned into years.

Their first big holiday was Europe in winter. They visited off-peak Italy, off-season France, graveyard-shift Denmark. They visited Russia. It was like stepping into a Russian novel of long nights and black ice, imperial architecture banked in snow, smoky bars where people took off their furred coats to gather round the fire.

She'd never skated before, so he took her onto the lake, leading her away from the edge with gloved hands.

She was so wrapped in layers that when she slipped and tumbled it was like falling on a cloud. She was already laughing before he made it over to her, but she stopped suddenly

when she saw the look on his face. He'd never moved so fast. He knelt beside her and tried to check her all over, his words coming out in a jumble. He'd never looked so scared.

“Hey,” she said, “I’m fine, I’m fine.” When their eyes met something changed.

Their breath was white in the air.

They decided to have a baby the next year. It wasn't long until she felt something, someone, growing inside her. He sat at her feet even before their secret started to show, singing songs to them both, reciting Edward Lear. They did Monty Python sketches together for their baby.

Then – their daughter was born.

“I’m in love,” she said, their tiny creation asleep on her breast. “This is the most precious thing in the world.” He was lying beside her, pressed close on the hospital bed. “Our family,” she said.

He smiled and kissed her softly, then their daughter. “Our family,” he repeated, then he grinned at her, that special grin he'd always had right from when they were kids. He said, “It started as a joke.”

Then he put on an awful accent, like Russia in winter, and quietly sang, “But do you love me?”

“Do I what?” she replied, and she meant to sing it back but couldn't quite. Her voice cracked part way through.

“Do you love me?” He said it this time, quiet, so quiet.

She thought of him, four years earlier: tottering around with a flower-festooned hat flopping over his eyes, laughing as they sat in the park under soft clouds with a sweeping

view over the city, the place they grew up together. How hot it was, the smell of clover, his blue, blue eyes.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose I do.”

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