



Our Fragile Lives

Marilyn Glenn

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by
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Chapter One

Meet the family

Grace

Grace Harrison struggled through the door of the TEA FOR TWO cafe. She carried several bags plus an umbrella which caused her to enter in a rather ungainly fashion. She loved everything about this particular café and so it was usually her place of choice whenever she was shopping and felt a bit peckish. She loved the signage of two smiling teacups sitting across from one another at a table and partaking from two smaller tea cups. The sign always made her smile, especially the cup on the left with curly blonde hair and ruby red lips, smiling and jolly. She wouldn't dream of telling her in case it caused offence, but the cup was the spitting image of her mother. The proprietors and their staff were always very friendly and the interior was cosy and welcoming. And of course the delicious home-made cakes and scones were another good reason to stop by. In addition to all these reasons, the café was also a place that she felt comfortable entering by herself. Grace didn't like going to new places unless she was with someone else.

Grace forced her wet brolly into the congested umbrella stand by the door, pleased to note that hers was the only one with a white handle so no one was likely to take it by mistake. It was also the only one that was bright orange in colour, so her fears of theft were even more reduced, because as her daughter Verity would say,

“Who would be caught dead using that awful thing?”

The place was quite busy for saying the lunch time rush was over. There was a tantalising aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the smell of damp wool and hot chips. Only four of the ten tables were vacant. Her favourite table in the corner was occupied by two men dressed in Business suits; their paperwork was spread all over the table as they tried to eat their lunch and discuss business at the same time. They didn't look likely to vacate the table anytime soon.

Surrounding herself with her shopping bags, Grace sat down at a table for two by the window. She wedged the bag containing Verity's birthday present between her leg and the wall to make sure it didn't fall over and break. The plastic bag felt wet against her leg so she bent to dry it with a paper napkin.

‘Looks like you've been spending all your money again Mrs Harrison. What can I get for you today...? We have some nice pumpkin scones or that lemon meringue you are fond of.’ Young Tracy stood with pad and paper at the ready.

Grace smiled at Tracy, commenting briefly on her purchases before placing her order.

‘Let me see....I think a pot of tea and one of those low fat apple muffins today, thank you Tracy. When I put my jeans on this morning, I had a job to fasten them. They fit perfectly a few weeks ago....I'm fed up with this wet weather, I hate being damp don't you?’

Tracy laughed as she tucked her stray blonde hairs behind her ears, ‘Mam says it's good for business. The customers have a second cuppa so they don't have to go back out there! It's supposed to fine up again tomorrow so we should have a nice weekend.’

Grace was looking forward to the weekend. Verity was turning sixteen and the family were getting together to celebrate. The original plan had been to go to a nice restaurant but now they had decided to celebrate at home and everyone was going to bring a plate so that Grace didn't have too much to do. Not that she minded making a lunch. She only worked part-time now, so she had plenty of time on her

hands.

Grace took a powder compact from her handbag and quickly powdered her nose. She didn't like what she saw in the mirror these days. People said she looked good for her age but she didn't want to look a good fifty four, she wanted to look twenty four or thirty four. She would even settle for forty four! Grace wasn't very tall and so appeared slightly plump although you wouldn't call her fat. Her skin was virtually wrinkle free and her hair remained auburn thanks to her sister in law Connie who was happy to tint it for her. The dampness had caused it to look a bit frizzy today and she looked slightly weary around the eyes. She took out her lipstick but put it away again. It would only wear off when she ate the muffin. She hoped Verity would like the porcelain doll. It was very expensive It will look lovely on a shelf in her bedroom.....Maybe she can start a doll collection as a hobby, she thought.

Grace decided to put two of the bags on the seat opposite, so that she wouldn't feel so boxed in. One bag contained a new top and pants that she had treated herself to. She was going to buy a dress but she always felt more comfortable in separates, they seemed to suit her pear shaped body better. And she would definitely get more use out of the pants. She had hoped to lose a few pounds before the party, but as usual she had put it off and put it off until it was too late to lose anything. Tom said he liked her with a bit of meat on her bones but he showed more interest in her when she was thin. Or was it she, who showed more interest in him, when she was thin? Being thinner, definitely gave Grace more self confidence; made her more likely to make the first move. Poor Tom...she hadn't made any moves lately.

Skinny Tracy arrived with the tea and muffin. Grace wondered how she managed to work amongst all the lovely cakes and still keep her figure. But she's only young. Wait till she's had babies and is going through the change! Grace thought, as she watched the young thing walk quickly back behind the counter. That's got to help as well...all that dashing around all day...I'm on my feet a lot of the time at work but I don't think I move as fast as Tracy. Grace mused as she unbuttoned her grey raincoat and slipped her arms out of the sleeves, draping it behind her but remaining seated on it. She was dressed in blue denim jeans and a yellow V necked sweater. She would normally slide her feet out of her shoes round about now and wiggle her toes to ease her aching feet, but today she was wearing a comfortable flat shoe so that wasn't necessary. Just as well, being as I'm not at my private table in the corner away from prying eyes.

Grace browsed through a magazine while nibbling on the muffin but folded it and pushed it back in her bag when she was confronted by women with perfect bodies on every page. It's enough to put you off your food!

Instead, she took out a notebook and pen from her handbag and checked the list of names she'd jotted down on the first page. The names were the list of guests who would be coming on Saturday afternoon, to Verity's party.

She didn't like to sit on her own doing nothing but eat and drink. It made her feel self conscious. Grace ran her finger down the list of guests, even though she knew who was coming off by heart.

There was Tom's sister Connie and her husband Frank. They were older than Grace and her husband Tom but they got on really well together and were their very best friends. Grace often thought of a well known saying in relation to Frank and Connie. You can choose your friends but not your family. Grace and Tom did choose their friends and they just happened to be family. Connie had more or less brought Tom up after their parents died within six months of each other. Their dad had drowned while out fishing with workmates. They had all been so intoxicated, that nobody noticed when he fell overboard. It would be funny if it wasn't so tragic. Like something out of a Laurel and Hardy film.

Tom's poor mum was dead six months later with a brain tumour, probably triggered by the shock of poor Thomas's passing. That was over forty five years ago, her Tom had been just about to turn ten.

Connie was twenty two, and had already been married to Frank for a couple of years, so of course Tom went to live with them.

Their house was a two up two down terrace with an outside loo or lavy as they called it then, short for lavatory. They said they would get somewhere bigger and better when Connie became pregnant .But that didn't happen until after Grace and Tom were married.

Grace and Connie became pregnant within three months of each other, both giving birth to daughters. June Grace was born on the eleventh of June and Maria Constance on the fourth of September. Connie was thirty eight when she conceived Maria and worried in case her baby would be backward or deformed, but Maria was a healthy happy baby named after her Italian grandmother. Frank built an extension at the back of their little house; comprising of a new kitchen and a lovely bathroom. This gave them the luxury of an inside toilet at last. The old kitchen became another little sitting room which they seemed to use most of the time. The outside toilet was demolished making room for a covered patio area. Being a terraced house the block wasn't very wide but there was room for a lawn and a good vegetable patch.

Coincidentally, when Grace was thirty eight, she conceived Verity May. She was probably conceived on Grace's birthday, September the eleventh, when they had both been a bit tipsy and hadn't bothered with birth control. A beautiful baby, born on the first of May; May Day. But Grace wasn't as lucky as Connie; her delivery had been long and difficult after Grace went into premature labour. Verity was born a month early and had been starved of oxygen for a few minutes during the birth. Everything had appeared to be fine initially but Verity's lack of co-ordination and general slow progress was picked up by the local baby clinic.

Up until Grace had turned thirty five, she and Tom had still hoped for a second child. But then they decided it was too late for another baby and started to use contraception. Grace had often regretted that night of unbridled passion. Verity hadn't been an easy child to rear. June's teenage years were like a blur. I guess we neglected our first born when Verity came along...but it would have been worse for June if she'd been younger...at least I was there for her when she was little. Grace consoled herself with these thoughts to cover up the guilt that she really felt, regarding poor June. June had had to grow up over night; often playing the part of mum, instead of big sister.

Grace's mum and dad would be coming on Saturday of course. Joan and Jack Pollard were in their eighties now but still getting about and enjoying life. Dad was a bit deaf and suffered with a dicky knee, as he called it, which meant the use of a walking stick. Her mum was in fairly good health apart from a bit of arthritis in her fingers. Tom would joke that it didn't stop her lifting a glass. Joan enjoyed a "good do", as she liked to call a party. She didn't drink a lot but what she did drink seemed to go to her head really quickly making her the life and soul of most get togethers.

June and her husband Mike would be there for sure. Although married for six years there was still no sign of a baby. Grace wondered if she would ever have any grandchildren. Maybe June would be like her and become pregnant when she stopped trying. Would she and Tom have been happier if Verity had never been born? Yes, probably, but it was too late to worry about that now! The last sixteen years had been very trying to say the least, but Grace felt sure that the worst years were over and that Verity would continue to improve in leaps and bounds.

Maria and her husband Dan were hoping to come all the way from Cornwall with three year old daughter Emma Maria and their new baby son Alexander. The baby was only two months old and was being baptised in July at a lovely church situated at Bude in Cornwall. Grace and Tom along with Connie and Frank were planning a week in Cornwall for a holiday so they would be able to attend baby Alexander's christening. Verity was going to stay with June and Mike while they were away. She had badly wanted to come with them but Tom had put his foot down. 'God knows we deserve a break

don't we? After sixteen years I think we've earned it!' This was said to Grace of course, not in front of Verity.

Grace topped up her tea and added an artificial sweetener to it. She popped the last morsel of cake into her mouth and told herself she would only have a small dinner that evening to make up for it.

The neighbours from both sides were coming and a couple of Verity's friends from school were being dropped off for an hour.

Grace put her notebook away and refreshed her lipstick. She wiped the condensation off the window next to her with a paper napkin. It looked as if the rain had stopped. She had planned on taking a taxi home but now she thought she might walk. Her home was only a fifteen minute walk from the centre of town and although she had four bags, they weren't heavy. She would manage easily if she didn't have to use her brolly.

After putting her arms back into the now quite wrinkled raincoat Grace settled her bill at the counter. By the door she reached for her umbrella but then had second thoughts and decided to leave it there. Verity is right, she thought; that thing is an eyesore. Let some desperate person use it. Let it stay in the stand for ever; ignored by everybody until Tracey or her mum decides to toss it in the bin. As she hesitated, a woman entered the premises, smiled and held the door open for her, so that her exit was without the confusion of her entrance.

Out in the street, the air smelt fresh and birds sang happily in the trees and on the rooftops. Were they happy that the rain had stopped too? They could leave their places of shelter and spread their wings at last. Grace had to tread carefully to avoid the puddles as she made her way home.

Walking past the public library, she was amazed at how clean the statue looked. 'The Thinker' was black and sparkling in the sunshine. The rain had cleaned it well....The bird's mess had been washed off it....The rain must have been heavier than she thought.

Perhaps I should have gone to the Ladies before I left the cafe. That pot of tea has gone straight through me. Grace thought as she became aware of the need to relieve herself. The sound of water running in the gutters and the hiss of spray as a vehicle drove through puddles didn't help reduce the sense of urgency. Shall I go back? Grace wondered...No, it won't take long to reach home....it would be a bit embarrassing going back just to use the toilet. So with tightened pelvic muscles she quickened her pace towards home. Grace passed the post office and remembered she needed some stamps; but she would leave it till tomorrow when she was less laden and her bladder wasn't bursting. Grace and Tom lived just a few minutes away from Frank and Connie. Their house was a three bedroom semi-detached with bay windows to the lounge and main bedroom on the front. They had lived there since they got married and were lucky to have paid off their mortgage by the time Tom was fifty. The money left to Tom from his parent's estate had been very useful in giving them a good start. His parents hadn't been wealthy but they owned their home and Tom's dad had been well insured.

Leaving her wet shoes on the porch, Grace dropped her shopping in the hallway, ignoring the mail on the mat and dashed through the kitchen removing her coat as she went, constantly jiggling till she was safely ensconced in the downstairs loo. Greatly relieved she returned to collect the mail and her purchases. The clock in the kitchen read three o'clock. Tom was picking Verity up from school today so she could relax until it was time to put the dinner on. Tom worked for himself as a carpenter and had been kept very busy for the last few months working on a new housing estate. Retrieving her raincoat from the kitchen floor and tossing it over her arm, she carried the bags containing her new outfit and Verity's birthday present upstairs. She would hide the doll in her wardrobe and hang her clothes on a hanger to try on again later. Grace took the doll out of the box and marvelled at the similarity in looks to her daughter Verity. If a doll maker had made a point of modelling a doll on her girl, it could not have looked more like her than this one.

The name of the doll had been Lucy but the ladies in the shop had been very accommodating and had allowed the label to be changed to Verity. The likeness was uncanny. She couldn't get over it. The blonde hair, not as light as Verity's almost white locks, hung down the dolls back in soft golden curls. The eyes were a deep blue with long sable lashes. The flesh colour was very pale with just a hint of colour on the high cheekbones.

'Absolutely beautiful...Absolute perfection'. Grace murmured to herself in wonderment as she held a photograph of her daughter and compared it with the doll now lying on the bed. The doll was dressed in a crinoline of pale blue silk trimmed with ivory lace and seed pearls. Her hair was held in place by a ribbon in the same shade of blue.

Grace carefully packed the gift back into the box, being careful not to tear the tissue paper that surrounded it, and then placed it on the top shelf of her wardrobe and tossed a sweater over it. There wasn't really any need to hide the doll at all. Verity would never go looking for it. But Grace enjoyed the secrecy of it. For her, it made the birthday more exciting. As a rule she found that the planning and anticipation of an event far outweighed the event itself. Perhaps that is because her expectations were always so unrealistically high.

The size fourteen black crepe pants were now hung on a hanger with a size twelve top of emerald green that the shop assistant had assured her looked stunning with Madams auburn hair.

It is quite flattering, she thought, as she held it against herself and looked in the full length mirror on the back of the bedroom door. It's a pity I'm turning into a pear shape, but the top is loose fitting so it will hide the bulges.....I hope Tom likes it...I hope he notices it...I hope we all have a lovely day.

Grace loved her husband deeply. She thought he had improved with age. Men are lucky she mused...they can have a pot belly and a bald head and still look sexy! Not that Tom had either of these defects. He still had a good head of hair and managed to keep his trim shape with little or no effort at all. It was for this reason that Grace always tried to look her best. When Tom was due home, she would put on fresh lipstick and a little cologne behind her ears. She would also kiss him on the mouth to welcome him home or to say good-bye. Not just a peck on the cheek the way her mum greeted her dad. In August they will have been married thirty three years.

That gives me three months to drop a dress size.....That should be a doddle!

Tom

Tom loved his work. He was so glad that his sister Connie had persuaded him to do an apprenticeship in carpentry. Connie became aware of his obvious talent with anything creative, while he was still at school. An ashtray, he had made, still had pride of place on the lounge coffee table; even though nobody in the family smoked anymore. At Christmas and Easter it was usually full of sweets. He had also presented her with a carved wooden fruit bowl that Connie swore was as good as anything she had ever seen in the fancy department stores. A work of art, she called it, said she would never part with it as long as she lived.

Tom remembered the pride he had felt when he had shyly given it to her. Her reaction had made him feel six feet tall. And now he was six feet tall, and handsome too with a good physique, light brown hair and hazel eyes. Everyone said he looked younger than his fifty six years but he argued that most people did these days.

Losing his parents had been very hard on him but his sister and her husband Frank had been more than any boy could have wished for. He was a shy boy of ten when he moved in with them, growing in confidence and self assurance as he approached his mid teens, thanks to the encouragement from both his sister and her husband and of course the appreciation shown towards him by the local girls....He had never given Connie and Frank any cause for concern, however, in regard to bad behaviour or mixing with the wrong crowd.

Tom had been grateful for the home given to him by Connie and Frank and valued them greatly as family. They were, after all, the only family he had left and he had no intention of blowing it and causing any reason for regret. He knew his sister longed for a baby, and had worried about it for the first couple of years. Would he be in the way? Would he be pushed into the background and treated like a burden?

Later, he thought he would like it. He could help Frank make a crib. He would be an uncle....he could baby-sit. By the time he was seventeen, he wanted the baby as much as Connie did. He wanted his sister to have everything that she wanted .As far as he was concerned, nobody deserved it more.

Frank was good to him too. More like a brother or a friend .Too young to be his father. Tom would help Frank by cleaning his Taxi cab and fixing things around the house: A loose door knob, a squeaky hinge or floorboard. There was no shortage of odd jobs in the old terraced house. He gave a hand in the garden too; discovering that he had a green thumb when it came to planting things. Everything he planted thrived.

Tom's best contribution had been a gate erected between the back garden and the side entry which was shared with the next door neighbours. It became necessary to replace the old one because it had a wide gap at the bottom and wasn't capable of keeping the bedraggled puppy in that Connie had found abandoned on her way home from work. Banjo had lived for fifteen years and the gate was still as good as new. Tom thought about the hanging of that gate now as he hung the last door for the day. It had taken him ages to get that damn gate to sit just right. But practice made perfect and made him the perfectionist and craftsman that he was today.

Yes, Tom had always liked Frank. When Frank first met his sister he was a taxi driver, working for an older man called Barney. Barney owned three taxis, driven by his son Brian, Frank and himself. Frank's ambition had always been to own his own cab, and by working long hours and saving hard, had been able to achieve it shortly before he married Connie. Connie worked as a hairdresser and loved her job. She had switched from full time to part time depending on family circumstances and actually gave up for a while when her mother was ill so that she could be with her as much as possible.

After their mum had passed away, Tom and Connie had both inherited enough money to give them

a good start on their chosen life path. Connie bought her own hairdressing business and helped Frank to achieve his goals; that of owning luxury cars and catering for weddings and other special occasions. There was more money to be made and fewer hours to work in the evenings. The cars were housed securely in a garage located a few minutes drive away. Frank rented this premises and the business was very successful.

Despite the extra money, Connie had had no desire to move to a bigger house. She thought their home was cosy and it was perfectly located close to town.

After Tom had qualified as a carpenter, he sometimes helped Frank out at weddings, as chauffeur, for one of the cars. It was on one of these occasions that he had first met Grace, his wife to be. He had been driving the bridesmaid's car and Grace was a fetching twenty year old attendant.

Frank had advised Tom on several occasions regarding the opposite sex. He had told him how to conduct himself and how to tell a good girl from a bad one. He had advised him not to let his hormones rule his head or to ruin his life by getting some girl into trouble. Tom had had several relationships before he met Grace, a couple of them fairly serious. In fact he had courted a girl called Yvonne for almost two years and had been thinking about getting engaged. But she had cheated on him and despite her pleas for forgiveness, had found himself unable to do so. He had been broken hearted but also very angry and had decided to be fancy free for a while. This episode was followed by numerous one night stands. Tom refused to allow himself to become romantically involved. But girls always found him attractive. Not only was he good looking, he was genuinely interested in what they had to say. Yes, Tom Harrison adored women and everything they stood for, but he had been toying with the idea of maybe moving to London and taking care of himself for a while. He figured if he was going to move out of his sister Connie's place he might as well try somewhere completely different. But it wasn't meant to be.

It was while driving three pretty bridesmaids to church on a sunny Saturday in July, when Tom Harrison fell head over heels in love with Grace Pollard. All these years later, he could still remember most of what was said by the giggling young women, in the back of the shiny white car.

"These bloody shoes are a bit tight; are yours? I hope we don't have to stand too long...Do you think it will be a very long service?"

"It's not a catholic wedding thank goodness...they last for ages! Do you think my hair suits me in this up style?"

"Your bust line looks really good with that neckline"

"Shhh..! The driver can hear you!" Grace had whispered.

'He's good looking isn't he? I wonder what his name is.'

'Hey Driver what's your name...? Love the sexy uniform.'

'Shhh! For goodness sake you are embarrassing him.'

Tom had smiled at Grace through his rear view mirror and introduced himself. He had explained that he was driving the car to help out his brother in law. He had also revealed that he was presently single, thanks to much prompting from the chatty bridesmaids. He had discovered that Grace worked with the bride at the local hospital. They were nurses in the maternity ward.

'Grace is the chief bridesmaid and we are the bride's sisters..And in six months we will be aunties!!' They had laughed.

"Shhh! Brenda he doesn't need to know that!" Grace had reddened as if they had been talking about her. She had admitted later, that she had felt guilty by association.

Jackie, the bride, wasn't a close friend, but she liked Grace and had set her heart on having three attendants.

Tom remembered the dresses; figure hugging pale lilac. The material, he was told later, was a

crepe. It had suited Grace particularly well with her auburn locks swept up high in soft curls. She had looked taller than her five foot two inches, with the big hair and the four inch stilettos.

Tom was attracted not only by her looks, but her shyness. The downcast eyes...the pink flush of embarrassment when her companions spoke out of turn.

When they arrived at the church, Tom jumped out and opened the rear door for the girls. He managed to make eye contact again with Grace, but she quickly looked away.

'See you later Grace,' he called, as she mounted the steps to the front of the church, in order to be photographed before the bride arrived. He had leaned on the car and watched her every move with mounting interest.

When the church service was over, there had been more photographs taken. As the best man had stepped out onto the footpath for a quick smoke, Tom had plucked up the courage to ask him about the chief bridesmaid and found out that Grace wasn't seeing anyone at the moment and was also told that her surname was Pollard. If she wasn't in the phone book, he could try and contact her at the hospital where she and Jackie worked as nurses.

Tom thought that he would have the pleasure of driving Grace to the reception, but instead, his passengers were the bride's parents and a grandmother who was very unsteady on her legs having obviously had one or two celebratory drinks before leaving the house.

He didn't see Grace again that day. After dropping his passengers at The Bull's Head Hotel for the reception, Tom's job was finished. He had to return the car to the garage and vacuum any confetti that might have found its way into the upholstery and then he could knock off.

* * *

Tom hadn't rung Grace. Instead he had waited outside the hospital whenever he had the chance. Several times he waited. Either before he went to work, or during his lunch hour, in the hope that her break may coincide with his. Sometimes after work, he would hang around for about twenty minutes, just to see if fate was on his side. He wanted the meeting to appear accidental which is why he had avoided making enquiries at hospital reception; but, after two weeks with no luck, he finally approached the desk of the maternity ward.

'Excuse me....does Grace Pollard work here?'

'Yes she does, but she is on compassionate leave at the moment. There's been a death in the family. I think she's starting back to work next Monday.' The receptionist flicked through some papers....

'Yes...Monday she is due back.....Can I give her a message or anything..? Who shall I say was asking?'

This woman was obviously just being nosy. Tom felt uncomfortable as she looked him up and down. It was as if she was trying to memorise every detail to pass on to her friends later in the staff canteen.

'No thanks. I don't suppose you have her address do you?'

'I do, but I'm not allowed to give it out; I'm sorry.'

'That's ok; I'll catch up with her next week...by the way...Who died?'

'It was Grace's brother John.' the receptionist told him without hesitation. 'He had just completed his study to become a doctor.....so sad...a friend took him for a joyride on his new motorbike...they hit a tree and John died instantly.....Grace was devastated....He was her only brother.' Just then the telephone rang.

'Hello Obstetrics.'

Tom nodded and smiled at the young woman as he left. What a gossip, Tom thought. I'm determined to contact Grace now and help her to come to terms with her terrible loss. No wonder I haven't seen her coming and going from the hospital.

It was towards the end of the next week that he finally spotted her. He was nowhere near the hospital at the time.

He had been working in a new hair salon that was situated across the road from the park. Tom was fitting it out in black and pink vinyl over curved working stations when he had glanced up and seen a young nurse with auburn hair strolling through the park gates. Tom had grabbed his lunch box and dashed across the road before he lost sight of her.

As he walked through the park gates he realised that he was still wearing his khaki overalls. It was too late to worry about that now, but he took out his comb from his back pocket and quickly ran it through his thick brown hair. He spotted her sitting on a bench near the duck pond and walked closer to make sure that it was her....there was no mistake, it was definitely Grace.

She was removing a sandwich from a brown paper bag as Tom sat down at the other end of the bench. He dared not sit too close in case he startled her. She was as pretty as he remembered her, even in a starched nurse's uniform.

'Hello there....Remember me?'

Grace looked both startled and baffled. She'd returned the sandwich that had been halfway to her lips, back to her lunchbox and looked on the verge of gathering up her things and running away.

'It's Tom, your chauffeur.....from the wedding....don't you recognise me?'

'Oh...Hello. You look different dressed like that. Sorry... I wasn't expecting to meet anyone here.....what a surprise.....you don't work in the park do you?' Grace said all at once, blushing while fumbling with her sandwich.

Tom laughed.

'No, I don't work here....I'm fitting a shop out across the road and thought I'd bring my lunch to the park....No that's a lie...I saw you and wondered if it was you...and it was'Tom felt like a gibbering idiot, but the ice was broken and they laughed and chatted together easily. He had to tell her that he had gone in search of her at the hospital.

'Oh...that's who it was! When Carol in reception mentioned it, I had no idea who it could be.'

They chatted for about twenty minutes, during which time, Tom learned that Grace lived in the village of Milworth, eight miles away from Loxborough and travelled into work by bus. Her dad gave her a lift when she was on a late shift. She was taking driving lessons and saving up to buy a little car.

Tom told her how sorry he was to hear about John, but she quickly changed the subject. Tom sensed that the death was still too new to talk about and that Grace was unsettled by the mention of it.

'Where do you live Tom?'

'Frederick Street. I live with my sister and her husband. It's only fifteen minutes walk from here but I use the works van.' Tom would tell Grace about the death of his parents another time.

Grace threw the last few crumbs to the ducks and as they fought noisily for the meagre offerings she started to collect her things together....Tom had to think quickly.

'Would you like to go to the pictures with me on Friday night?'

'Yes.....alright....but I'm working till six....I suppose I could get changed at work.'

'Great! I'll meet you outside the hospital's main entrance at half past six. We'll get something to eat afterwards if you like.'

Grace said she thought that would be nice, and as they both rose from the bench and stood up they couldn't help but laugh. Tom was towering over Grace in her sensible flat nurse's shoes.

‘Don’t worry Tom; I’ll wear high heels on Friday!’

From that day on, life for Tom Harrison would never be the same. He returned to work, walking on air. He wanted to jump up in the air and click his heels together!

Tom smiled to himself as he recalled the day in the park all those years ago. That was my lucky day, Tom thought. And I wouldn’t change a thing. Grace and me will have our time together again....Verity’s growing up and she’s definitely improving. Coming out of her shell that’s for sure....She just needs to curb her enthusiasm a bit now so that people don’t feel uncomfortable being around her...I’ll ask Grace to have a word with her....It’s more a mother and daughter thing....Grace always acted with decorum. She’ll know what to say to Verity. But it was time to pack his tools away now and pick his daughter up from school. However, this would be the last time that he would have to do it because Verity was leaving school on Friday.

Tom had noticed the looks that his daughter attracted, especially from the opposite sex. She really was a stunner. Tom wondered now where her looks had come from. Grace and he were both good looking but Verity’s appearance was perfection. Maybe God, if he existed, was compensating for her poor intellect. Not that she was an idiot or anything...in fact if you didn’t know her history you would probably just think of her as a dumb blonde. He thought she looked a bit like his mum. Tom hoped his daughter would lead a normal life now. Meet a good man and settle down. It will be good to have Grace back to myself....she lives and breaths that girl.

Tom arrived at the school five minutes early and decided to stay in the car and read his newspaper. He hadn’t had a chance at lunch time because the young plumber, who was working in the same house as Tom, was having marriage problems and wanted the benefit of his experience. ..Who does he think I am anyway? Tom thought as he unfolded his Daily Mirror and started to read the front page. He must think I’m some sort of agony Aunt. What the hell do I know....He should be talking to his wife not me...he’s like a woman with all his so called feelings!

Tom wasn’t hard hearted he had just been embarrassed by the young man’s honesty. When Tom had been his age there were some things that you kept to yourself. What is it they call themselves? New age men? In touch with their feminine side indeed! God help us!

Tom wound down the window now so that he would be able to call out to Verity when she eventually came through the school gates.

Connie and Frank

Connie and her husband Frank were sitting in their lounge room enjoying a cup of tea and a piece of cake. Something they did most afternoons about this time since they retired from their busy work schedules. Frank sat in his favourite armchair while Connie sat on the settee with her legs curled up to one side.

Frank had sold his wedding cars to one of his regular drivers. He had financed part of the deal himself so he still received income every month and this would continue for another five years.

Connie still had her hairdressing salon but she had put a manager in charge now and only went to the salon if it was really busy or if one of her old clients specifically asked for her. Connie was very good at putting hair up in elaborate styles and so her expertise was invaluable for weddings and balls.

'This cake's nice.' Frank remarked. 'Have you made this one before?'

'No...I got the recipe out of Woman's Own....I think I'll make another one to take to our Toms on Saturday.'

'I thought you were making a trifle for Saturday.'

'I am but there'll be a few folk there and a cake never goes amiss...Everybody likes a bit of cake...I can't believe young Verity is turning sixteen...She's a beautiful girl.'

'A bit too beautiful if you ask me...Toms going to have his hands full with that young miss.' Frank said with a worried expression.

'What do you mean? The flirting? Grace should have a talk to her about that....I don't suppose she understands how she comes across to people...She's just a young child snuggling up and asking for cuddles.'

'Maybe so, but its embarrassing...She'll get herself into trouble one of these days. It's like she knows exactly what she's doing...the way she looks at a chap waiting for a reaction. It's indecent and its time our Tom told Grace to stop treating her like a baby...Is there any more tea in that pot?' Frank held his cup out for a refill.

'She's going to do a few hours a day at the salon starting next week. Just sweeping the hair up and tidying to start with...We'll see how she goes....she might turn out to have a flair for hairdressing. Linda will teach her a few basic tasks.' Connie said as she topped up both cups and added milk and one sugar.

'Let's hope she's not more of a hindrance than a help. Good job that bloke you've got working there is a queer!'

'Frank! Who said he is?' Connie laughed. 'He's just artistic.'

'He sounds like Liberace and walks like Mae West! Artistic be buggered.'

'Anyway, he's a great hairdresser. He brought a lot of clients with him; helped the business no end.' Connie argued.

'Yes luv I know...I'm just having a bit of fun. By the way, what's for dinner? I'll go in the garden for a bit now it's stopped raining and pick some vegetables, if you tell me what you want.' Frank threw back the rest of his tea and put his cup and saucer on the tray that was sitting on the coffee table.

'I've got a nice piece of smoked haddock for tonight....Pick a few peas and carrots and maybe a bit of cauliflower if you fancy some.'

'Make some cheese sauce then. I love cauliflower cheese.'

Connie picked up the tray and carried it through to the kitchen as Frank walked out of the back door and into the spring sunshine. Mossy, their ginger tom followed close on Frank's heels. The cat followed him everywhere.

Frank had taken the cat in when a pal of his had died of cancer. Len and Frank had done their national service together and had remained in touch back in Civvy Street. Len had lived in Nottingham, so they only got together now and again. Len's mother had run off with a fancy man when Len was just a young boy. As a result, he absolutely despised women. He had been for tea once and never hardly spoken a word to Connie. Of course he never married, just lived on his own with his cat Mossy .If he had any family, he never spoke of them. When he was really ill, Frank visited him and agreed to take Mossy and give him a good home. He was already ten years old and not expected to live much longer but here he was five years later; a woman hater just like his master. Maybe not a woman hater, but he definitely preferred male company. He allowed Connie to give him the odd pat, and would be her best friend this evening when the fish was being dished up!

Connie watched Frank through the kitchen window. He was turning seventy at the end of the year but you would never guess. His jet black hair had quite a few silver streaks through it now. In fact the grey hairs probably outnumbered the black ones. Yes, his face had a few lines, but they were laughter lines. Frank was always making her laugh. She considered herself very lucky. He was bending over now, pulling up some carrots. He's still got a lovely bum, she thought.

Frank straightened up and waved the carrots at her; Connie waved back and then started to rinse the tea things.

Yes. I really love you Frank Bonetti, paunch and all....I'll give Grace a ring tonight...arrange to have lunch....have a little chat.

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