

I'll Never Be Young Again

'I don't know what you're doing with him,' Becca said. 'Paul's too old for you, Mum. And he's...'

'He's what?'

'Well...boring, to be honest. And a bit of a bully. You need someone more... spontaneous.'

Underneath, I heard her unspoken words: more like Dad.

'Beggars can't be choosers, Becca. I'm not young anymore.'

She reached towards me across the table. 'You're hardly a beggar, Mum. And you're not ready for all that stuff.'

'What stuff?'

'The bungalow, National Trust tea shops, elasticated waists. I bet he's got Anusol at the back of his bathroom cabinet. He looks like a guy with piles.'

'Becca!'

'I'm sorry, Mum, but he's just not right for you.'

I bit my lip, sheepish. 'He's invited me to France for a fortnight.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'You're not going, Mum, are you?'

'He's arranged everything now. It's too late.'

'Cancel it. Tell him you've changed your mind.'

'I can't. Not now.'

I should have listened to her.

Under the magnifying glass of a holiday, you see the real person up close. For twenty-four hours a day, there's no escape. One of the things I've come to realise – how did I not see it before? - is that Paul speaks in clichés. 'It goes without saying' is his favourite. If it goes without saying, why is he saying it? Whenever he needs to pee, he says, 'I'm off to the little boys' room', and I want to shout, 'toilet, bog, urinal...anything, but not 'the little boys' room!' And when talking to strangers – as he frequently does - he says, 'When you get

to our age', covering my hand with his. I'm included in his age. And yet, it seems I'm also a child, my dinner choices scrutinised and advised upon, my wines chosen and accompanied by little oenophilic lectures. He translates everything for me, even when I understand. He's been to France 'more times than he can remember', knows it 'like the back of his hand'. He ignores the fact that I've also been to France before, with Tom and the children, and as a child myself. My first disappointing kiss was with a French boy at Eurocamp - Jean-Luc. Like Paul, his mouth was too wet. Slack.

What *was* I thinking? But I was so lost after Tom died, and so terribly lonely. It felt like my life was over – and then, there was Paul. He was at least *someone*. I needed someone. So, I let him make his plans, include me.

'You're an art lover,' he said. 'Same as me.'

I am an art lover. But I'm not the same as him.

At least this holiday is almost over, our luggage in the car ready for the long drive north in the dark tonight. I will sleep. Or pretend to sleep.

This last day was clearly marked on Paul's comprehensive holiday schedule: Arles. The amphitheatre and the musée this morning. Now a late lunch at the famous Café on the Place du Forum.

The Square is hot and packed with tourists. Ricard banners are strung between buildings; parched flowers hang from window boxes. In the corner, a taxi driver touts for business, Moroccan music spilling loudly from his scruffy cab: clay pot drums, the frantic wail of an exotic, joyous, lute.

'Great music,' I say.

Paul huffs. 'Just sounds like a lot of noise to me.'

'I love this kind of stuff. Tom and I went to WOMAD every year - you know, the world music festival. It was fantastic. We used to dance so much we reckoned we wouldn't need to go the gym for a month afterwards.'

Paul humphs. 'Well, you wouldn't catch me dancing at a music festival.'

The taxi driver approaches us. 'Monsieur. Madam. Très comfortable. Air con.'

Paul waves him away and walks across the square towards the yellow café.

'I reckon it was just about here,' he says, planting his comfort-soled sandals on the Tarmac.

'What was?'

'Where Van Gogh stood. Look, the Café is just the same as when he painted it.' He etches an imaginary easel in the air.

The same! How can it be the same? The walls of the Café are painted a crude, sulphurous yellow. Yellow awnings stretch wide across its open front terrace. It's packed; every table is taken. It's Le Café La Nuit, but it's the middle of the day. There are no glorious pools of illumination against the darkness, no exploding stars in a velvet blue sky, no old, worn cobbles, no solitary diners watching strollers pass by in the cool of the night.

I'm hot and thirsty. I want a Coca Cola.

Paul's snapping with his camera.

I tug at his arm. I feel desperate to get away. 'Let's go. It's too busy. There are no tables.'

He stares at me, incredulous. 'Go! But this is Van Gogh's café. From the painting. You *love* Van Gogh.'

'I love his art, Paul. Not him. And not...' I gesture at the crowds, ... 'this.'

He frowns.

'Can we go? Please.'

'No. Someone will leave in a minute. We'll wait.'

As we wait, a young man saunters round the square with menus from one of the other cafes. 'Bouillabaisse. Moules-frites,' he shouts. Pony-tailed, he wears a crumpled linen shirt, thongs on his feet. I like the way he looks, so thrown-together, so free and easy... so different to Paul in his Panama hat, neat shorts, leatherette man-bag. For a fortnight, I've watched Paul's skin broil in the sun, birth new wrinkles. There are knotted veins in his calves. I hate his calves. I hate his toenails too, the way they poke out of his sandals so brittle and yellowed as though he's been smoking twenty a day with his feet; though he disapproves of smoking, of course, finds my occasional evening Marlboro as objectionable as I find the sight of his washbag on the sink, his chemical anti-perspirant, those little sticks that he flosses his teeth with.

'Look. A table's just come free.' He dives under the canopy, lays claim to a pair of rattan chairs with a satisfied smile. I follow, reluctant.

When the waiter arrives, Paul orders champagne. Loudly. Makes a show of it.

'But I'm thirsty!'

'Garçon!' he shouts across the restaurant at the waiter's retreating back. 'Eau gazeuse aussi!'

The waiter sneers.

'*Garçon.*' It makes me cringe.

Paul clears his throat. 'So, now that the holiday's almost over, what do you think?'

'About what?'

'About us.'

Oh God, I don't want to do this now.

'You see, I kept the Café till the last day because I thought you'd love it, and er...I wanted to ask you ...' And before I can stop him, he's down on one knee at the side of the table, bones cracking with the effort, ring-box in hand ... 'will you marry me?'

The other tourists are looking now, smiling at this old fool down on his knees. They won't stop looking until I say yes.

I can't do it, can't humiliate him. He's beaming, so delighted with his own magnanimity, completely assured of my response. So, I take the little diamond from him, let him slip it onto my finger. There's a tentative ripple of applause from nearby tables. I feel my face flush with shame.

Paul pours the champagne into flutes. 'To our future.'

I watch the bubbles through my glass. There's something inside impeding their easy rise to the top, a speck of tea towel lint perhaps. The bubbles congregate around it like a virus to a cell.

What *am* I doing? Of course, I can't marry Paul. I don't even like him. And imagine a lifetime of being told what to do! No. I'll never be young again, but I'm not old yet. I don't have to settle for security. And Paul ...well, he's just being himself. Who the hell am I to keep criticising him? I don't have the right – no right at all.

'No...Paul, no!' I remove the ring from my finger, place it on the table in front of him. I need to get away, not tomorrow after the holiday is over, but now. Right now.

'What *are* you doing?' he says, watching me get up. 'We haven't even ordered lunch yet.'

I kiss him on the cheek. 'Goodbye, Paul.'

'Where the hell are you going?' He holds out his hands.

I walk across the Square. The young Moroccan taxi driver is inside his cab, window down, his music pounding the air. A sudden surge of confidence courses through me. I'm independent. I don't need Paul. I don't need anybody.

'La gare, s'il vous plaît.'

He opens the door for me. 'No old man?'

'No. No old man.'

'Bon.'

We swing out of the square. The driver grins at me in the mirror, his teeth white and strong against his olive skin.

'You like the music?' he says.

'I love it. Turn it up. Turn it up loud!'