



Madeira

He came for cake. The first time.

This is what he said: You invited me once. You said pop in any time. Innocent, innocuous words, the first time around. Meant well. Remembered from a long time ago.

‘You were eight,’ I said. Blank words. Blank expression.

‘Yes. You’d just moved in. We’ve known each other for a long time. I’ve been meaning to come for cake. So, I came today. You said come for cake.’

So we had cake. Madeira cake. I didn’t even know we had any in the house, but there it was, at the back of the cupboard. Still in date. Still snug in its wrapper. Plump, moist still. Still somewhat non-plussed, I cut the cake. Put it onto two plates. Made tea. I assumed he wanted tea to go with it. You have tea with cake. He waited in the lounge while I made these ritual preparations. He sat straight, his arms resting around his knees. He looked like a young giraffe, sitting there on our sofa. All legs and arms and unexplained intentions.

‘Is Chris at work?’ he asked me as I lowered myself into the chair opposite. I don’t know why I hesitated, but half way down to the seat, I paused.

‘Yes. Of course. It’s a work day.’

I sat rather harder than I had meant and hot tea splashed my legs. He got up straight away and took plate and cup out of my fingers. He tended me carefully, like I was the child and he the adult and not knowing what else to do, I let him.

'You're not at work.'

I felt my spine prickle. 'I work from home. I've worked from home for five years.'

'Since the accident, yes?'

He crouched in front of me. Too close. His eyes were blue but had grey rims. Like they had been outlined in a felt pen to make them stand out.

'Yes, since the accident.' I tried to shuffle back, out of his personal space, back into my own. He leaned forward, following me.

'Did it hurt?'

I tried not to breathe through my mouth while he was so close to me. I have a thing about breath. I hate to breathe second hand air and don't like the thought of anyone breathing mine. It's a funny little thing that Chris likes to tease me about. I won't sleep facing anyone, even as a child I used to sleep with my back to my mother on the odd occasion I was allowed to share her bed. I recall feeling her heart beating against my back and the warmth of her breath on my head.

I came back to him as if from a distance. He was still staring at me, eye to eye, his crouching form as tall as my sitting one. He was leaning back a little on his heels, his gaze speculative. He looked as if he was admiring a painting, or a joke in a newspaper, perhaps.

'Yes it hurt. Like hell.'

I think his eyes widened slightly at my tone. I think his lips parted a little, breaking the seal between them. I imagined the pop. I did not imagine him rising to

his knees in front of me, still resting his hands either side of mine on my chair cushion.

He began to visit regularly after that.

'Was Chris driving or you?'

It was maybe the third or fourth occasion he had come to visit. I pushed the hair out of his eyes for about the dozenth time, so that I could see them properly while he spoke. He lay curled up at my feet like some kind of pet. His head rested against my knee, a warm comforting weight.

'Chris.'

'Did the other driver die?'

I shook my head. 'Nobody died. Why are you so obsessed with the accident?'

He ran a hand up my leg to where the scars began and I felt the pad of each of his fingers through the material of my trousers. His nails were just this side of too long, but I felt them scrape against my nerves. Felt the hairs stiffen and rise, the blood rush to the surface of my skin, tingling. He smiled and his teeth looked so straight and perfect. Tiny teeth. Baby animal teeth.

'You have to go. They will be wondering where you are.'

I never say who they are. Never ask after them or send messages back when he passes on their regards. My neighbours are nice people. Good people. They would not want their son spending so much time with me if they knew why he came. I watched his expression crumple and wondered how much they did know.

'Go home. Study. Get clever. Go to university and find yourself a nice girl.'

'I am clever,' sulkily. 'You always send me away. I can help you. You don't need to send me away.'

I can't look at him when he gets like this.

Petulance reminds me of just how young he really is.

I stand up carefully, determined not to betray how uncomfortable it still is to carry my own weight. He is on his feet beside me straight away. He moves bonelessly, like he is made of liquid and light.

'Beautiful boy,' I say softly, but I still send him away. If I don't send him away I am afraid I will be tempted to try and keep him here forever.

Chris became ill around Christmas time. It began like any other seasonal cold. Then we began to realise that there was more to his symptoms than a simple virus. There were scans. Nerve tests. Results that led to more investigations. Results which led down blind alleys.

He stopped working in March and there were two invalids in the house and the only money coming in was from the erratic bundles of proofreading I managed to get hold of. Life changed again.

My beautiful boy came one more time to see me. He had his university letter in his hand and a smile on his face that looked genuine for a change. I didn't let him in. He stood on the doorstep, jigging from side to side like an excited child. He was taller. Wider, slightly, at the shoulder. I leaned against the door and tried to keep the sound of his voice from filtering through to the lounge.

'I brought you something,' he said softly, his eyes alight with mischief. I tried not to look at him too closely. I didn't want my expression to give anything away out there on the street.

He reached into his coat pocket. Pulled out a small square of delicatessen cake, wrapped in cling film.

'Your favourite,' he said simply and before I could stop him, he had bobbed up onto his toes and kissed me on the mouth. I drew in a breath and before I could stop it I could taste him. I swallowed hard. Peppermint and aftershave balm on my lips, my mouth suddenly dry.

'Greg! Greg, who is it? Is it for me?'

I watched the grey circles of his eyes. Joy in his face. In his eyes. His breath. Fresh air. Life.

'Thank you,' I tried to say. For the cake. But he shook his head and then he was gone. I closed the door slowly.

'No, it's not for you, my love. Just a delivery. From next door. A little present for you. To make you feel better. Some cake.'

I made my feet take proper full steps back into the sickroom that had used to be my office.

'Your favourite, look. Madeira.'