

Bushes and Briars

He wondered if she had come here to jump, too.

Bloody typical, he thought. All I'm asking is to be able to end my life in peace and what do I find? Some stupid bitch standing in the way. He stood for a moment in what had become his usual state of frustrated rage. It had taken a week of considered reasoning to gather up the remnants of his self-respect and decide that death was the only sensible solution. He could not afford the mortgage any more. His debts were mounting. Losing his job had been just the last step on the downward ladder.

Should he ignore her and jump anyway? Should he come back later? What if she was going to jump too? He wondered if she was as desperate as he was and then decided that nobody in the world was as miserable and downtrodden by life as him. His vision blurred as the familiar tears pricked at the back of his eyes. Perhaps if he made himself obnoxious, she would hurry away and leave him to end his life with some dignity.

I should have gone for the scotch and the pills, he thought, then remembered that scotch and pills did not always work. Jumping from the bridge would. Even if he did survive the fall the currents here were so notorious that his lifeless body could well be swept into the middle of the ocean and they would never find him. The fly in the ointment of his plans, however, was standing five metres away.

She looked like an ordinary woman in a headscarf, probably not the sort to carry a mobile phone, but you never knew these days. You saw the bloody things glued to the ears of the most unlikely people and the last thing he wanted at the moment was a guardian angel mounting a rescue. The way his luck had gone this last year, it was just not worth taking the chance. Damn the cow. She stood gazing down into the rushing torrent far below and what he could see of her expression was as unreadable as Claire's had always been.

Then an idea struck him. What he needed to do was lure her away and he could come back and get on with the job properly and in peace. Yes, that was it. Simple really. He just had to amend his plans, be a bit flexible. He walked to within a few paces of her and mirrored her stance leaning over the metal railing gazing down.

'Water never loses its fascination,' he ventured at last, turning his head.

She looked vaguely in his direction, but immediately dropped her eyes, not meeting his own. She turned back to the river. Martin cursed inwardly. What must he look like? He had not shaved in days. He frowned, trying to remember whether he had even combed his hair this morning. He

Bushes and Briars

knew that his trousers and jacket looked crumpled because they had been on the bedroom floor for the last three days. He would have to get some sort of response from her if he was going to entice her away from the bridge.

‘Yes, I love water,’ he continued. ‘It lets me drop my thoughts into it and they float out of sight. Don't you think so?’

There was a long pause. Normally, by now, Martin would have turned and slunk away in the face of such rejection, but, come hell or high water, he was going to jump off this damn bridge if it was the last thing he did. The irony brought a grim smile to his face.

‘Well, I don't know about you, but I could do with a cup of tea,’ he said biting back the words ‘a double Scotch’. ‘How about joining me? It's so cold with this lazy wind today.’

The woman finally looked directly at him. His shock when he saw that she was a nun and not an ordinary woman stopped him in his tracks. She frowned as if she found herself in an alien land.

‘Lazy wind?’

‘Er...yes. It's too lazy to go round you, so it goes through you instead.’

‘I see. Yes, I suppose it is. I hadn't noticed.’

He bit back a remark about thermal underwear. ‘How about that tea? My name's Martin Gaunt. There's a little cafe down the steps and along the foreshore.’

There was another pause. He fidgeted in case she thought he was trying to pick her up. Then she smiled.

‘Thank you, I'd like that. Perhaps it is a bit chilly.’

The red gingham curtains looked welcoming and the cafe was only a quarter full as they opened the door and went in. There was the usual pause before conversations were resumed.

I suppose we do look an odd couple, thought Martin, nun accompanied by down-and-out. Like his companion, he avoided any eye contact. Without consulting her, he walked to the counter and ordered two mugs of tea. He patted himself down and found some coins. He followed her to the small table she had chosen right at the back of the cafe. As they sat down, Martin looked at the ring on the fourth finger of her left hand. She caught the direction of his glance and sighed. Martin realised that here too, was a troubled marriage.

‘What's your name?’

Bushes and Briars

'Lucy.'

'Well, Lucy, you must be freezing. This should help remedy that.'

'Perhaps. Although, to tell the truth, I don't feel the cold. I just need-
ed somewhere to think my dark thoughts.'

'I can't believe you have dark thoughts.'

'Don't be fooled. Everybody has dark thoughts sometimes.'

'You amaze me. Tell me about them.'

She paused as a waitress put two steaming mugs onto the table. Lucy stirred her tea automatically, staring into the whirlpool made by the spoon

'It's about love I suppose,' she said. 'Love. Commitment. Quality of life.'

'Ah, yes well, my views on love are a bit jaundiced at the moment, so I don't think I'll be very helpful to you.'

'What do you mean?'

'Love. It is so overused it doesn't mean anything these days. It's just a word people say.'

'That's because it means a lot of different things to different people. What does it mean to you?'

'I've only ever known the one sort, so as far as I'm concerned, I mean physical love,' replied Martin feeling himself blush. 'I mean, you only usually ever encounter one sort, don't you?'

'Of course not. What about the love between parent and child? That isn't physical, is it?'

'I wouldn't know. Claire refused me children, so I never had that experience.'

'You mean that you have never yet had that experience,' she replied.

Now it was Martin's turn to be silent. He had never looked at the possibility of life beyond Claire. He had spent the past week visualising Claire's self reproach at his suicide and the fact of it coming forever between her and Matthew. His legacy to them would be that whenever Claire or Matthew reached for each other in the future, his innocent ghost would slide between them, unseen but real.

He sensed Lucy examining him and almost jumped when she leaned across putting her hand on his.

'Why don't you tell me? I'm no priest but it will do you good to talk.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You're hurting very badly, I can see that.'

Bushes and Briars

Rage mixed with impotent anger surged through him until he could feel the blood pounding in his temples again. Without realising it, he began to speak, trying to drown her with his words. How he had come home from work and found Claire's letter. How she had explained that she was writing in sorrow rather than anger. How he had rushed upstairs to find that she had taken all her things. He tried to explain how empty the house was without Claire. How empty his life was without Claire.

'You see, I never believed in anyone until I met her,' he finished lamely.

'Not anyone?'

He looked up in defiance. 'No. Not anyone. I was an only child and my parents were killed in a car crash when I was eight. I had to go and live with an aunt and uncle. Prayers night and morning. Church three times on Sunday and constant threats of Hell and damnation. No love, no comfort, no freedom, no joy. Whatever I may have believed in, I have certainly never believed in God.'

'You mean a merciful God?'

'I mean God.'

Now that he was talking at last, Martin found himself trying to bait this woman. Trying to make her pay for his hurt, his humiliation and the neighbours' sniggers.

'You lot are the root of it all. All the misery, all the unhappiness, everything.'

She deliberately misunderstood him. 'Of course we are. How could you have been born without a woman?'

'That's right. Be like the rest of your sex. Twist it round to suit yourself. Claire was like that. Always in the right, never less than perfect. Do you know, she once told me that I was boring?'

'And are you?'

'No, of course I'm not.'

'How do you know?'

'What do you mean?'

'How do you know you're not boring?'

'I can't be. I've got a very responsible job – I had a very responsible job,' he corrected himself. 'And I've got good qualifications.'

To his consternation, she burst out laughing. He half rose to walk out, but changed his mind. 'What's so funny?' he demanded.

Bushes and Briars

By this time, the other customers were beginning to stare at them and Martin suggested that they leave. Outside, Lucy's demeanour changed and she kept her eyes fixed firmly on the pavement.

'How about the park,' he suggested.

The flower borders were looking hopeful as if they had only just turned the corner after the long illness of winter. Some foolhardy daffodils had decided to chance having their heads blown off and were showing off to their less adventurous neighbours still in bud. Martin and Lucy found a bench sheltered from the wind by a hedge. She looked him directly in the face.

'You must forgive me. I did not mean to be insulting or provocative, but you sounded so complacent. I abhor complacency.'

'I expect you find your friends complacent,' he said trying to needle her.

'I have no friends.'

'Oh, come on, everyone has friends. You must be close to some of the sisters, surely.'

'It isn't that sort of order. I have colleagues.'

'And do you find your colleagues complacent?'

She thought for a moment. 'They're always so unfailingly cheerful.'

'Most people would like that.'

'Possibly. I find it depressing. What progress can a soul make if it thinks that everything is perfect all the time?'

The pause this time felt more companionable. Martin felt the need to talk to this woman who was making him question things about himself. Things which had been going round and round in his head. He leaned towards her, his words spilling over in their anxiety to be free.

'I suppose there has to be a meeting ground between complacency and continual discontent. I loved my work. I was a radiographer at the Infirmary, but the salary was never high enough for Claire's social aspirations and the hours were sometimes unpredictable. I always felt I was putting something back, though. Doing something for the community, helping people, but everything seems so worthless without her.'

'But it isn't worthless. You were giving a real service to people who needed it. You were fulfilled by your job. I feel so useless, like an appendix only being evident when it needs removing.'

Bushes and Briars

'I can't think of anything less like an appendix than you,' he spluttered giving way to a fit of laughter in which she joined him a few seconds later.

'Tell me about your wife,' she said after a while.

'She was – is - beautiful, witty and a talented artist. When we married she had just finished Art School. My friends were knocked out by her, but after we married she became more concerned with herself and her social position. Being seen at the right parties and stuff like that. She wouldn't even consider having our child.'

'Perhaps she doesn't like children.'

'Doesn't want to lose her figure more like.'

'And was it all her fault?'

'She wouldn't commit herself to working at the marriage or supporting me in my job.'

'And did you support her?'

'Well, yes. She didn't work. I had to support her.'

'I didn't mean that. I meant that even though you did not share her objectives in life, did you still encourage her to fulfil herself?'

Martin stared her, frowning. 'I don't understand.'

'Well, your aims in life are totally different from hers, isn't that so?'

He nodded.

'So, what makes it more important that you should fulfil yourself at her expense?'

'I didn't think I had.'

'Well look at it from her point of view. Maybe she was bored to tears. Maybe she thought that she could be a better wife if she stayed at home and made it nice for you. Maybe she was concerned with her appearance so that she never let you down. Maybe going to the right parties might have helped you professionally. Did you ever tell her how much you appreciated her or even how much you loved her?'

The point struck home. The truth was that when he arrived home after a tiring day's work, it was as much as he could do to eat his meal and collapse in front of the television. Conversation with Claire had descended to the level of 'do you want a pudding or cheese?' or 'what's on the other channels?' Try as he might, Martin could not remember the last time he and Claire had been to a concert, or out for a meal or even discussed anything in-depth. He put his head in his hands.

'Oh, I see. Poor Claire.'

'Perhaps you could try again.'

Bushes and Briars

'I don't think so. Claire has gone to live with the man who used to be my best friend.'

'You'll never know if you never try.'

For the first time in four months Martin tried to put himself in Claire's shoes. He groaned and closed his eyes. 'I must have made her so miserable. I never stopped to think how she felt. I've been so busy drowning in my own pity that I never thought about her.'

'It's easy to see everything from your own point of view. It takes the eye of love to see it from the other person's perspective.'

He grasped her hand. 'You've made me see myself so clearly,' he said, turning the ring round on her finger. 'You've clarified everything. You know I came down this afternoon to.....'

'Hush, I know.'

He wondered what would happen if he went to see Claire, ask quite humbly if he could meet her to talk. Could he persuade her that he had changed and that they had a future together worth fighting for? Above all, could he tell her that he loved her and that his life was no life without her in it? And if he did, would she listen? He turned back to his companion.

'You have so much to achieve, too,' he said. 'If it wasn't for you, well...' He stopped for a moment. 'You could help so many people, just like you've helped me,' he went on. 'Why don't you leave your unhappy marriage and fulfil yourself?'

'I am already spoken for.'

'Yes, but that isn't sacrosanct. Not these days.'

'It is to me. I made my vows and I intend to keep them.'

'Is that what is troubling you now, Lucy? I find it somehow difficult to call you that. Is it your real name?'

'It's the one I was christened with.'

'And how troubled is your marriage?'

'Before I met you, very troubled. I felt so isolated. But talking to you has put things back in their proper boxes if you see what I mean.'

'Not really. Tell me.' She had listened to him. It was only fair that he should listen to her.

'It's about commitment, isn't it?' she said at last. 'Committing yourself wholeheartedly because you believe wholeheartedly that it's right.'

'You are right. That's the word. Wholehearted. Why did you think your marriage would be any different to anyone else's?'

Bushes and Briars

'I don't know. I expect it's because I'm not complacent, so I question things. But the questions piled up and the doubts grew until I was so confused I didn't know what to do.'

'And how have I helped?' Martin felt a rush of pride that he was the strong one now.

'You've reminded me that there are two sides to every relationship. Like you, I realise I was only thinking of mine. Perhaps that's why I thought my marriage was in trouble. Because I thought too much and trusted too little.'

'Are you sure you can save your marriage?' he asked.

'Oh yes. I'm very sure now.'

Martin looked across the park towards the river. 'I'm glad I came out this afternoon. My mind is so much clearer now.'

'I'm glad, too. I'm sure we were meant to meet and help each other.'

'I don't suppose I shall see you again.'

'Better if we don't.' Lucy rose to her feet and looked directly at him. He smiled trying to reassure her that he was out of danger now. She nodded.

'I'd better get back. Good-bye, Mr Gaunt. Bless you.'

Martin also rose and took her proffered hand. 'Good-bye, Sister Lucy,' he said and stood watching her habit flapping in the wind as she walked down the path and out of sight.

'At least you'll feel better,' he said aloud. Then he turned and headed in the opposite direction back towards the bridge.