

Azure

I brush her cheek with the backs of my fingers. It feels warmer than I was expecting, but my own hands are cold from the winter air. I loosen my scarf and take off my coat. Then, before sitting down, I look to the floor and notice I've brought some flecks of mud into the room. I smirke as I imagine her tutting at me before pulling out the dustpan and brush.

'Yes dear, I know', I say to her, rolling my eyes, 'don't forget to tap my shoes before I come in!'

I smile lightly and then I look down at her. She looks terribly peaceful, breathing steadily, her pale pink lips still, her eyes closed. I gently tuck her wispy white hair behind her ears, letting my fingers linger on her curls as I do so.

'So beautiful', I breathe, 'as beautiful as you were the day I met you'. And what a day that had been! 'Do you remember?' Though I know she does.

'The carnival charged through town, all drums and majorettes... I can still hear the whistles blowing! What a row they made. And the rain, *oh* how it rained! The drops were pelting down, dancing off all the brollies! But the poor people in the parade! They were all utterly drenched!'

I can't help but laugh gently. I can see it all as clear as day, even though it was more than fifty years ago. Did I detect a twitching of her lips just then? A small indication that she's gone back there too?

'It did stop eventually though, didn't it? The sun came out and the streets shimmered brilliantly. Just in time for the fair. The music, the carousel, the motor cars. And that ferris wheel which I remember so vividly with all its bright yellows and blues, and

those red seats. And the workers wiping the seats to stop people getting wet bottoms!' I chuckle at the memories as they continue to unravel.

'Well, there I was with Charlie and Reg, and all we were interested in were the majorettes and the hot dog stand! Charlie had his eye on the majorette leader, and there was Reg telling him he didn't stand a chance. He certainly had a point there. I mean, she was beautiful, far beyond any of our leagues. But I'd been wrong about that hadn't I? Because as you caught my eye I'd felt nothing like it before. In a split second you froze me, all my nerve endings went into a frenzy. Whatever had you done to me?'

I glance down at my arms and pull up my jumper sleeve. Amazing. There they are, the goosebumps. She has done it all over again.

'Of course, I didn't go over to you. I was far too shy!' I continue. 'And Charlie had seen you first, after all. So we carried on about the day, eating, drinking, and having quite the celebration. But then, when I went to get ice creams, there you were again. And you were as pretty as a picture; so pretty I couldn't even say hello without stuttering like a fool! Your rain curled hair and sparkling eyes. Your luscious scarlet lips. I didn't dare let my eyes linger too long on that little red dress, I knew I was already blushing uncontrollably. And if you could've seen my knees, my goodness how you'd have seen them wobble!' And as the goosebumps had arrived, so did my knees tremble a little.

'You know, I remember the first thing you said to me, it's etched into my brain. You said - and you were really pouting at me - "I hope you're buying one for me too!" and of course I did, and I fell for you right then'.

Looking at her now I still see the traces of those pouting lips.

'What a flirt you were! But you were also wonderfully gentle, and clever, and thoughtful. We sat side by side on that ferris wheel, and of course our bottoms got wet because the seats hadn't been dried properly! But what a wonderful day that was. It was the beginning of quite an adventure wasn't it?'

I pause for a while, my memory creating snapshots of the past years. The petals being thrown into her hair at our wedding, the car journeys where we'd sing at the top of our lungs, our little breaks away, the way we'd hurled paint at each other when we decorated that old house in Cornwall. And her funny little habits; the way she pushes her hair behind her ears only for it to fall back again, the way she licks her fingers before turning each page of the paper, the tutting at my ineptness in keeping the house tidy... I can see her face as it changes, hear her voice as it deepens, and as I touch her hands, I feel her frailty. Mine have warmed up now and I wrap them around hers. I draw a breath shakily and I force back the mist that's prickling my eyes.

'I am sorry, my darling', I say. 'The nurses are telling me you may sleep for a long while yet, but they assure me that you're comfortable. And I'll keep coming in to see you each day, as I promised. But you have to promise me one thing in return. You have to keep fighting to wake up, fighting like you've never fought before. And one day, when we're back home and this... the accident... is all behind us, I hope you will forgive me and we can continue on our adventure together. I am certain we have more memories to build'.

I truly hope for it. It's been three months since she tripped on that lead I'd stupidly left trailing across the floor. Three months since she fell asleep, and three months that

I've tortured myself with guilt over my irresponsibility. But I love her and I will keep my promise. I can only hope that she hears me.

Written by Jo Ash © 2024